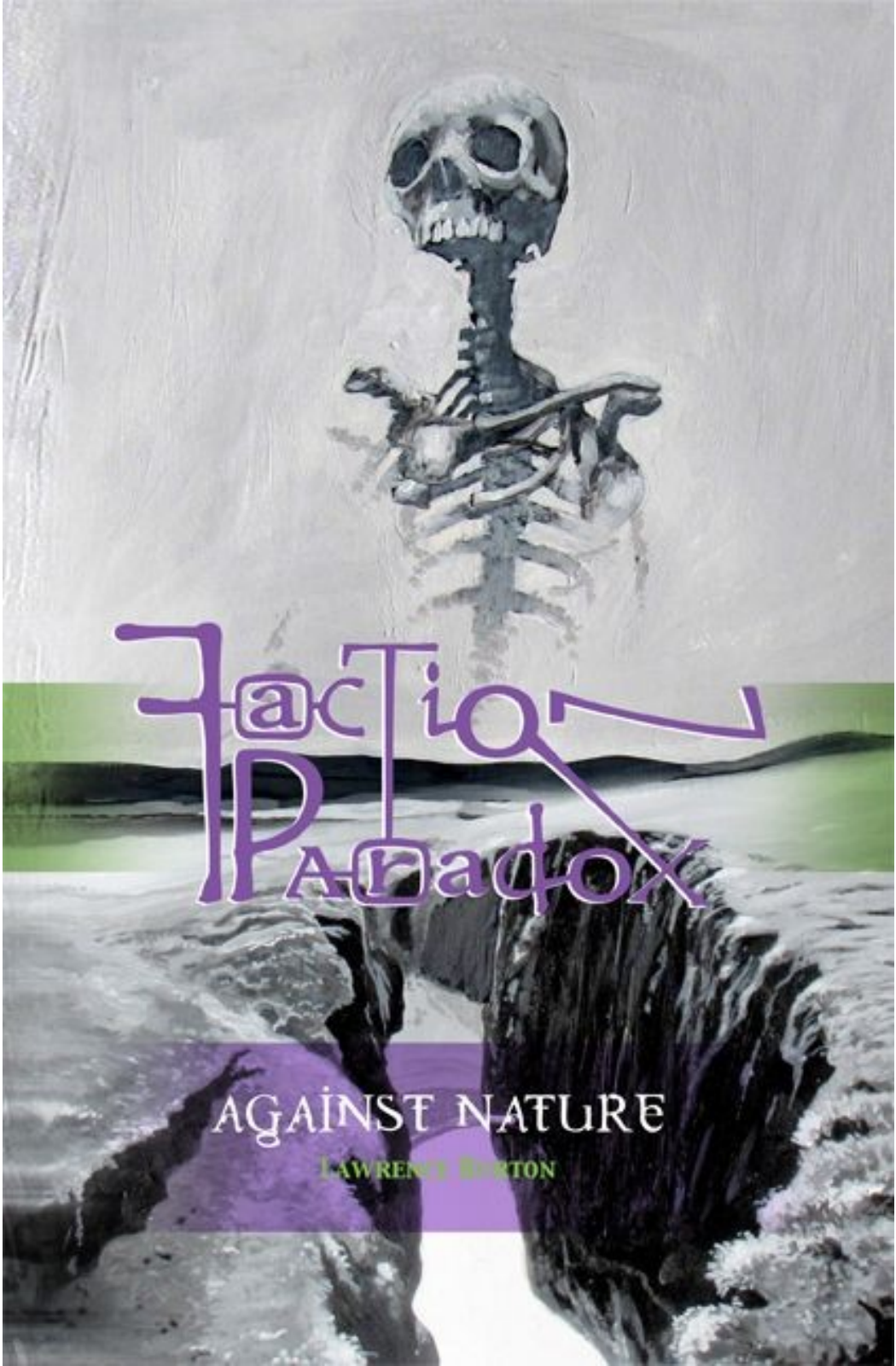
Faction Paradox
AGAINST NATURE
LAWRENCE BURTON

Against Nature

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for Andrew

14th July 1961 - 26th January 2009

Drudges created by Marc Platt

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http://englishmanintx.blogspot.com/

Never have I felt as strongly as today that I was devoid of secret dimensions, limited to my body, to the airy thoughts which float up from it like bubbles. I build my memories with my present. I am rejected, abandoned in the present. I try in vain to rejoin the past: I cannot escape from myself.

- Nausea, Jean-Paul Sartre.

1.1 (east)

There is the world we see, and there is the world beyond, the realm of sacred forces. Each is different to the other, but there are points at which they meet, where crossings are made. Lakes, rivers, and caves - these are dangerous places at the periphery of common experience, regions where one may glimpse the mechanism of the cosmos.

Primo Acamapichtli Isleño de la Vega stood at the edge of the fountain gazing at coins that had been tossed into the water, willing himself to see something more meaningful than a few pesos scattered in vague hope of making the big one in the Lotería Nacional. The centre of the fountain was dominated by a monolith, a basalt replica of Chalchihuitlicue, the River Goddess. It was a copy of one now standing guard at the gates of INAH in the city centre and which had been found here in San Miguel Coatlinchan, a surrogate for that which had been taken.

Maybe *this* was a glimpse of the mechanism of the cosmos, here at the water's edge under the gaze of *She of the Jade Petticoat*. Everything came from water. It was one of those points upon which both science and religion were roughly agreed, loosely speaking. Maybe it didn't matter that this was only a replica. The image was the thing, the representation. One could not deny her sacred credentials any more than one could claim that a word repeated was not really a word.

Noon approached and the sun had begun to cook the flagstones of the Zocalo. Vehicles sounded their horns, raising dust and exhaust fumes. A group of school children were crossing, heading towards Avenida Insurgentes, a giggling crocodile of T-shirts and backpacks. Soon the Aztec street theatre would arrive with pheasant tailfeather headdresses to dance steps which they felt were almost certainly the sort of thing their ancestors would have appreciated, and sweating tourists in comical shorts would applaud and throw coins and try their best to avoid being kidnapped. It was good for business no doubt, although Primo couldn't help but wonder if a point hadn't been missed somewhere along the line.

There was another point that he had himself missed, he realised. Something large had set off this train of thought, something so vast that it remained, for the moment, invisible.

He had spent an hour or so at Rudolfo's place. They drank coffee and

listened to music and talked about life. Primo needed to be at work at six, and it seemed wise to allow about an hour's travel time into the city. Once he was home he would have something to eat, sleep a while, and then get ready for the evening shift.

Caves and lakes: the idea that was too big to consider now returned to him. He'd been inside a cave, hiding out, and there was that damn pain at the base of his spine. He reached back and felt the skin as raw and sensitive as ever beneath his shirt, still with no idea what could have caused it. Rudolfo had told him to go see Ultima. She would know what was to be done.

He had been in a cave, hiding out here in Coatlinchan, and the rest of the memory jarred against common sense because on some level he knew with certainty that it had not been a dream. Acamapichtli, his namesake and founder of the Mexica dynasty, the first true Tlatoani to occupy the seat and mat of Tenochtitlan had hidden himself away in that cave; and he too had thought about the world he saw and the world beyond and the points at which they met. Taking the positive view, the cave was, so he had decided, a womb from which history would be born.

That would have been late fourteenth century, the 1370s or thereabouts, when the Valley of Mexico was ruled by Tecpanecs and the Mexica were still not much more than a tribe. Acamapichtli had been in hiding under the protection of Lord Acolmiztli of Coatlinchan.

Primo had all of this written down somewhere, and certainly it turned up in a few of the accounts, but his memory tended to retain the mythology better than the dubiously historical details his ancestors had described to Christian friars. Coatlinchan, the *Serpent House*, was on the eastern shore of the lake, the place where the sun was born from the underworld each day, and the place from which the first ruler emerged. If the history seemed doubtful, the symbols were at least rock solid.

Primo crossed the Zocalo, heading for Avenida Morelos and home, thoughts of lunch inspired by the smoky tang of beef and corn burning on the griddle of a food seller.

He could see it, clear as he could still see Rudolfo's front room in his mind's eye. Somehow, by *some* mean, he had looked to a circle of sunlit greenery framed by the mouth of the cave, the leaves and boughs of a woodland that kept the subterranean hollow hidden from the familiar world. A little way past those trees and down the mountain's incline, the town of Coatlinchan had gone about its daily affairs - hunters bringing fish,

frogs, and birds up from the lake; merchants dealing precious feathers or stones in the market; mothers filling flat breads with peppers and michihuauhtli for the hungry mouths of their little ones.

A flurry of movement had unsettled the leaves of the trees, the bird he had much later identified as a screech owl. A man named Tzonatatetl had drawn closer, the jingle of ceremonial gold denoting his presence in the gloom, remarking *I see that you are troubled, Lord.*

Of course I am troubled, Primo had told the cleric without feeling he needed to state the reason. He still considered himself an ordinary citizen of Culhuacan. Now he had learned he was to become full Tlatoani for the Mexica, his father's people.

You served as Cihuacoatl to the court, Tzonatatetl had told him, *which somewhat disqualifies this claim of having been an ordinary citizen. Furthermore, your mother is of Culhua blood. Her grandfathers were Toltecs. Fame and esteem is your birthright.*

It was not only that Primo recalled all this, but that he recalled it in such detail, and with such an overpowering sense of the familiar. He knew that certain poisons could produce visions, and thought again of the burning in his lower back.

A healer had arrived at the cave wearing robes of a material that was neither cotton nor maguey fibre, the cut and hue of which betrayed foreign heritage; and his face and hands had been the colour of woman's milk. Primo's retinue took this in their stride, concerned more by the possibility of his being a Tecpanec assassin than his ghastly appearance. The stranger spoke as though his tongue were better attuned to some rustic language, explaining that his name was either *Serpentine Fire* or *Fire in the Serpent* or something of that sort.

Primo had told him *sorcery has been visited upon me, as though I have walked over the hair of the Gods. I am unaccustomed to the ways of those who cause such things to happen, but I recognise an attack to the darkest third of my tripartite being. My affliction came from clouds and mist, and that part of my body which sits east bears an unhealing wound.*

The foreigner took a tool from the pouch upon his garment, something like a bolt of stone with four hollows carved into its length. Its face was inlaid with an equal number of silvered thorns stood in a row, each projecting outwards like the needles of a young mizquitl tree. Primo winced at the improbable memory of four needles piercing his flesh. It had been a dream by virtue of the fact that it could hardly have been anything

else; but he had no idea where he'd experienced it, or when it had surged up from the depths of memory. He understood only that he knew it now, and knew it as though it had happened. It had been a dream because he read far too much, and his own second name was Acamapichtli thanks to an unusually patriotic father, and there was no such thing as reincarnation. Even Ultima would have agreed with him on that score.

Why always Cleopatra or Elvis Presley, she once asked him in rhetorical fashion, *why never the poor soul who has to clean the lavatory or wipe arses for a living?*

Minutes later, Primo was stood before the door shared with three other families, fumbling a key from his pocket, slotting it into a lock which rattled within the wood. He stepped into the sepulchral cool, savouring cold black and white tiles through the soles of his shoes; then flinching as those same black and white tiles moved, a rippling motion, something that stirred his gut adding to the pain in his back. It took him a second to recognise the swift motion of a snake making a break for a gap where the street door didn't quite meet with the step. It was one of those little rattlers, grey with the darker bands, and very shy - nothing worth getting upset about.

The sound of the television set buzzed somewhere at the top of the stairs. His mother was home from her cleaning. He found the second key on the fob and went into their apartment.

'Hello, my son. How are you this day?' His mother's voice sang over the television noise but her gaze remained fixed upon the screen,*TV Azteca* as usual. 'What do you have to tell me?'

'Rudolfo is fine.' He set his bag down upon the counter top and went over to the huge, old fridge, big as a safe and very noisy. The cool air hit him in a wave as he opened the door and briefly recalled the snake, wondering why it should have come inside rather than stay out there soaking up heat like every other reptile in the city. He took out a transparent plastic box in which his mother had saved a couple of tacos and went to the side for a plate.

María, his mother, sat upon a stool at the counter, still wearing the dull blue apron that came with her job. She sipped a glass of milk, her gaze loyal to *Los Peligros de Ivan* on the television but her mouth curling as though sucking a lemon. 'There he is, the perfect victim,' - her face creased in disgust - 'the poor, sainted Indian child with his heart of gold.'

It took Primo a moment to realise she had been referring to the telenovela in which a dashing and yet patently black-hearted Christian

delivered a choreographed beating to a young boy in dazzling white campesino clothes.

María sucked at a tooth. 'Never do you see one of *ours* but he is in the news because he has shot someone, or he is dying in a novela so that others may have something to cry over.'

Primo allowed the moment to pass, then made his announcement. 'I will visit Ultima, I think.'

'That is a good idea. She will know what to do. Always you were her favourite.'

Long hikes through woodland back when he was a child, passing offerings to the old woman - cigarettes or liquor dangling from twine in the subterranean gloom - the memory went out as a commotion erupted from the other rooms, squawks of animal panic. His mother was already through the door. The handle slammed into the wall dislodging yet more plaster in the usual place. Primo set his plate to the counter and raced after her.

The front room was still in darkness. María knelt amongst the chaos, a chair and some newspapers which had been scattered by the collapse of bird cage and stand. She glared at the cat, at *Señor Mullido* as he was called.

'Primo, hold that beast - quickly!'

He scooped up the creature, so focused upon its prey that it barely noticed, muscles taut with fur arched all along its back. It wrestled, compelled to return to the scene of its crime by pure instinct. He tossed it out into the hall and slammed the door.

His mother wailed softly. 'Oh Francisco!'

Before her the lifeless bird lay surrounded by a tiny halo of torn and bloody feathers.

1.2 (north)

That morning, Todd Calavero stepped from his car and caught sight of the girl with her dog just as he was about to clock on. The girl was okay, she dressed nice like Selena used to dress nice, but it was the dog that stopped him in his tracks. *His name's Troy*, she told him. The little dog had licked his hand, tiny pink tongue and eyes twinkling with canine excitement.

I can't believe this ain't him, he told her as he petted the chihuahua, still looking for something that would prove this *wasn't* his own dog returned from the dead. *Mine was called Scarface*, he explained, knowing he'd blown it as soon as he heard himself speak the words aloud. The shutters went down and her smile became subject to visible effort.

Face, that is *Scarface*, showed up on his fifth birthday, a tiny, fluffy puppy with enough energy to power half the city. That dog had been his best friend for more than a decade. Neighbourhood kids thought it was funny, this yapping little powder puff and them with pit bulls and the sort of things you kept chained up at night. Face was small, but he had ten times the personality of those other mutts. Hector used to come over and they would play with the little guy, throwing sticks, getting him all hyped up. Lord, how Todd missed that dog.

Now he was thinking about Hector Alvarez, wondering what happened to *that* guy.

In an effort to focus, Todd crouched low and went slowly around the dresser, studying the grain to see if there was any part he'd missed. The lighting wasn't so good - neon strips mounted up near the roof, daylight from a row of frosted windows at the same level. The dresser was pine, and the pressure hose always messed up softwood - stray flakes and crap getting sluiced around making it difficult to see patches he missed. There was one now, a lime green map of South America holding out beneath the cornice. Snapping protective goggles back over his eyes, he took up the pressure hose and angled the neck towards this last rebel stronghold of encrusted paint. He squeezed the trigger, arms locking against the deafening force of the jet, water pummelling the wood and misting the air with vapour and chemical residue.

Minutes later he was in the locker room stowing away his apron and gloves. He went over to the sink, pulled off the goggles and made a weary self-assessment in the mirror: he looked like shit, more bleached patches curling up amongst the dark mass of his hairline. Wearing the cap never seemed to make much difference. Caustic soda splashed everywhere, got into everything.

The door creaked and Gordy came in. 'Knocking off early, huh?'

'Ten minutes ain't so early.' Todd heard keys rattle and a squeak of metal as protective gear was stashed away. He pawed at his face, feeling the dry, chemical texture of his skin. 'Why the hell didn't I stay in school?'

Gordy came to the next sink along. 'We're black men. We

ain't *supposed* to stay in school.'

Todd laughed in spite of himself, twisting the faucet. 'Man, you *know* my moms is Mexican.'

'Then you *definitely* ain't supposed to stay in school.' Gordy chuckled into handfuls of soapy water. 'Church called in saying he got frostbite. You heard that shit?'

Todd sighed, knowing he'd be picking up Church's ticket. 'That would be some world class AC that fool got back at his place, you better ask somebody.'

'Says he got himself checked out, and the doctor told him *frostbite*.'

'Shit don't even make no sense.'

'Next time I wanna take off, I'mma tell Johnson I got a allergy to moon rock. If they gon' believe anything, I'mma get me a piece of *that*action, I tell you what.'

Still laughing, Todd went over to the lockers, fetched out his sneakers and pulled the work boots from his feet. He laced up then secured the door with a twist of his key.

'See you cracking a smile there.' Gordy dried himself. 'I figure you had stuff on your mind?'

'Personal shit is all.'

Johnson had screwed up his pay, but Todd was in no mood to speak on his private arrangement and so left it at that. To be fair, Johnson had only screwed up in so much as he'd hired Milton Taylor for wages guy, failing to pass on the detail of the one salary drawn on group expenses and paid out as cash each Friday. That was just the way it had to be.

He went out across the shop floor. Saint and others were unloading some truck that had shown up after time, hefting raggedy-ass tables and chairs to the rear of the bay with plenty of cussing. Most of it would take a good half day soaking in the vats, so tomorrow would be easy enough, at least more like a normal day without his having to cover Church's fat, frosty ass.

He went out to the lot, heading for his car, Hector and Scarface both coming back to his thoughts. Days gone, reminders of better times, and here he was, the man who couldn't get his own damn wife to return a call. The line of vehicles didn't say too much about the average salary at JMB Restoration, but Todd's heap of crap was at least insured against theft by virtue of making the rest look classy. He pulled on the door and climbed in.

Five minutes later, he was back at the house; *house* not home.

'Hello, my son. How are you this day?' His mother's voice sang over the television noise but her gaze remained fixed upon the screen,*Azteca America* as usual. 'What do you have to tell me?'

'Same old deal.' He set his bag down upon the counter top and went over to the fridge, big as a safe and very noisy. He opened the door and rattled around the lower shelves, moving containers of milk and sweet tea in search of beer. Having found a can of Pabst, he swung the door shut and popped the top. 'How you been, mom?'

'Did you call on your wife?' María sat upon a stool at the counter, still wearing the dull blue apron that came with her job. She sipped a glass of milk, her gaze loyal to *Al Diablo con los Guapos* on the television, her mouth curling as though sucking a lemon. 'That girl—'

'No, I didn't speak to Selena. I'll do it tomorrow.' Todd took another pull on the can. The house looked good, he decided, somehow different. 'Church called in to tell us he's got frostbite.'

'Frostbite?' The woman stared at her son for a moment, then looked sadly into her glass of milk, dark thoughts ploughing a field on her brow.

'That's what *I* said.' Todd raised his beer, toasting the back of his mother's head. 'Plus, strangest damn thing, I seen the ghost of Face.'

'You saw the ghost of your Chihuahua. This is what you are now telling me?'

'No, but it looked just like him. I had myself a real moment there.'

His mother shook her head. 'What sort of fool calls a dog *Scarface*? That is a terrible name for a dog; and that is a dreadful movie.'

'Mom, I didn't name him after the damn movie. I named him after the guy from Houston.'

'Oh well that is different.' She sighed, then went over to the wall mounted AC to fiddle with the settings. 'Either we are being cooked alive or we risk frostbite like your friend.'

Todd watched her. She hadn't been well. She suffered some sickness and was always run down in the evening, although it seemed like she was okay right now. He thought better of asking after her health, like the question alone might bring on the daily slump.

She returned to her stool. 'The plants in your room are all dead.'

He'd been back three weeks - although hopefully this wouldn't be a

permanent arrangement - and still she called it *his room*, a thing from childhood.

He finished his beer. 'I'll take them out back.'

Todd dumped the can in the recycle bin then went through the house to *his room*. He moved out two years before and his folks had used the space for storage: boxes stacked along the wall, ironing board up against the closet, crap from the dresser stuffed into bags, temporarily ousted by what few clothes he brought back. The houseplants were mostly those for which his mother hadn't found room elsewhere - cacti, some leafy things that might have flowered had they lived.

He pulled an empty cardboard box out from under the bed and loaded it with pots, taking care not to prick himself on any thorns. The cacti were pulpy and black, sunken like sad old balloons. He carried the box to the hall and out to the garden, to the wooden compost bin. It was made from broken packing crates, but was still pretty fancy for this neighbourhood. Most people just had yards, some place for the BBQ pit and the dog poop; but his mother had a *garden* with flowers and plants and things to eat - although the tomatoes were looking kind of funky.

He took the pots over to the compost and began upending them, squeezing each in turn to loosen the plug of soil knotted solid with dead roots.

'Hey, vato!'

Todd looked around. A young Mexican guy was leaning across the fence, wiry and wearing a black tee imprinted with text so gothic that it was anyone's guess as to what it said.

'You're María's son, right?'

'That's me.' He wiped soil covered fingers off on his jeans and went over to shake the offered hand. He realised he knew this guy. 'Todd. Glad to meet you.'

'Jorge. Your moms told me you were back here.'

'Shit ain't so good between me and my wife right now. We're cooling off some.'

'Bad news, man. Hope it works out.'

Todd's memory clawed back a detail from elementary: Jorge was the older kid who used to live across the way from Hector. Todd and Hector had been so tight back then that people thought they were brothers, although that all changed by the time they hit sixth grade.

'You remember Hector Alvarez?'

Jorge thought for a moment. 'That's going back some but yeah, he was over on Lakewood.'

'That was my buddy. You don't remember me, I guess.'

The neighbour laughed. 'Sorry to say I don't.'

Todd looked over at the box of dead plants. 'Anyway, man, I got shit to be getting on with and I been home from work but five minutes. Nice meeting you though.'

'For sure.' Jorge grinned and began to walk away. 'I'll see you around. You take care now.'

Todd watch the guy slip back into his house, then returned to the pots. The sun had gone in and a blanket of fat, grey clouds hung low in a hot, heavy sky. He turned his face to the heavens and wondered if it was going to rain.

He hadn't thought about Hector in a long time. The two of them had drifted apart, as small boys sometimes do when their friendship is founded on mutual love of Power Rangers and Batman. Together most weekends, they had built their own private universe, one in which the normal laws of adults and obligation held little currency.

What the hell ever became of that kid?

Todd had grown, but maybe not so much as he would have himself believe. He was still feeling his way here and there, still trying to settle on an idea of how the world worked. Moments like this still caught him out, names which had slipped from his life.

He picked a pot from the box and shook the desiccated plug of earth into the compost just as the first spots of rain began to tingle upon his face.

1.3 (west)

The blinkers were fashioned from the clothing of the deceased, specifically a pressure suit once belonging to Herrare, the material cut to form a collar of hide curving around the eyes in the manner of goggles. Emioushameddhoran vel-Xianthellipse adjusted the knotted strips of fabric which kept the blinkers in place and took a moment to inspect herself in the cheval glass. Her dark, shoulder length hair had become ragged and her complexion was more grey

than its usual olive, but these details could not be helped. Taking a deep, fortifying breath, she slid the bolt back from the portcullis and stepped out into the Netherweald.

Panic numbed her gut. She took another deep breath, set a foot forward and forced the expectation of terror to the back of her mind. The realm in which House Meddhoran had embedded itself - the *Netherweald* as Gedarra had named it - was cold and grey, a private universe of freezing fog embracing a decreasing expanse of shale. Less innocuous were the environmental wraiths forever slithering along the edge of one's peripheral vision, nightmares inhered within the substance of the place. Emiousha was only a childe, loomed to full physicality but lacking the experience of an elder; but then they were all of them childrene, and she was their Kithriarch, and as such she bore a burden of responsibility. She would not concede to fear.

Reminding herself that these blinkers at least occluded the visual expression of the wraiths, she looked along the blur which served in lieu of a horizon until her eyes found the silhouette of Rhodenet's hogan. He had sewn it together himself, cannibalising various garments once worn by Amonis, the first casualty of the blight.

Now *there* was initiative.

The hogan had been established at fifty-two of Emiousha's paces from the entrance vault of their chapterhouse, the location of a flaw as divined by amaranth, but the space had begun to reduce. She counted out her steps as she made the crossing, crunching across wet stones before concluding with forty-seven, one down from the forty-eight of the previous houseday. The Netherweald was dying, local spacetime - or whatever it was - coiling like leaves in Harvestide.

Hunkering down, she drew back what had once been Amonis' favourite dhoti. A male childe worked within, close cut brown hair and a curiously defiant forehead, handsome in a way. He was poised, supported by elbows, behind in the air and nose to the ground. In his left hand, the brush by which he painted tiny characters and archemathic symbols upon the stones. The pigment had been drawn from his own vein. He had already covered a large area by this means, moving the hogan along as required.

Despite her better judgement, some aspect of this endeavour struck Emiousha as improbable. They hadn't been here so long as to account for such a body of work; *and* the notion of an entire volume of code transcribed across enough pebbles for a respectable beach was clearly

ridiculous. Nevertheless, this was apparently how it worked in the Netherweald.

'Well met, Rhodenet.' She stood waiting for an indication that she should enter.

The male did not react. His concentration remained with a thick book laid open on the shale comprising uneven sheets of grubby paper, the source of the archemathic symbols he was transcribing upon the environment. Then his head turned, small sullen eyes acknowledging the inevitability of intrusions such as this.

'Well met, Kithriarch. We really can't keep on meeting like this.' As ever, the greeting sounded like a challenge. 'The other childrene will talk. *Rhodenet and Emiousha*, they'll say.'

Momentarily discomfited by the innuendo, Emiousha nodded to indicate that the point was taken: her visits were a nuisance. She knew there would be nothing he could tell her which was not already known, and if there were it would almost certainly constitute unwelcome tidings. She should not have come here.

She turned, looking back to the pale silhouette of House Meddhoran. It seemed so thin, like some desiccated old soil tower you would see out on the salt flats, and she found herself wondering how its distended upper tiers had not yet succumbed to gravity, but of course *that*would be down to the nature of the Netherweald. It always was.

This bubble universe *behaved* as though it appreciated gravity as a concept; yet there was neither gravity nor electrical force nor even anything resembling the noösphere promised by the terrible, overbearing sense of death of which the wraiths were only the most vivid expression. The archemathic information of the realm had been unreadable even when House Meddhoran was in possession of instruments by which such material could be read. Despite all that had happened and all they had lost, the childrene were yet to learn anything from this situation.

Still very much absorbed in his work, Rhodenet spoke without looking up. 'Either go away or come in, but please decide soon.'

The Kithriarch ducked down and went into the hogan, absently shifting the blinkers up onto her brow. 'Laethynrisa has found another bellum notitia.'

'That's nice.'

'Would you like us to blank out your windows?'

He shrugged, evidently not caring one way or the other.

A silver sphere sat aglow upon the ground immediately behind him, an amaranth, a mechanism designed to locate and repair causal discontinuity. It was a miracle that the three such devices bequeathed to House Meddhoran had remained inviolate whilst everything else slid backwards down the path of its own architextural evolution, conceivably something to do with the self-correcting nature of the amaranth itself; or maybe not.

Back on the Homeworld, amaranth technology had been considered unreliable by some. Conversely, Ordnance-Tetrarch Goralschai had taken the position that such devices were effectively useless in the hands of those lacking the ability or imagination. This had most likely been a veiled reference to the archons of the Jallama Reed initiative, just one of his innumerable grievances.

Unreliable or otherwise, Rhodenet's amaranth presently served as monitor to a diffuse area in the substance of the realm, a flaw which had been taken to represent proximity with another, much larger universe. Whilst the Netherweald lacked discontinuity in the conventional sense, its bubble structure might itself represent discontinuity in the context of an adjacent body of history, which *could* have triggered the amaranth at this point of least resistance.

It was as good a theory as any.

Having reached the terminator of his current skein of archemathic code, Rhodenet returned his brush to its carafe of water and sat up. He met Emiousha's gaze with silence, then a glance back towards the amaranth and a sigh. 'If anything kicks off, you'll be the first to know, all right?'

She took a moment to decode the colloquialism, the result of something unorthodox in his biodata, then nodded to show that she understood. As anticipated, it had been a waste of time coming out here. She tugged her blinkers back into place and made to leave, but stalled as Rhodenet muttered to himself.

Sometimes I wish we'd never left the Homeworld, he had said, his tone low and seditious.

Flushing, the Kithriarch forced herself out of the hogan before she could say anything she would regret. Meddhoran was born from the Newblood program. Seeded by House Xianthellipse as an exercise in diversity, it had conspicuously failed to deliver anything useful in terms of the War effort, and the era of Homeworld society humouring its mistakes for the sake of an aesthetic was long past. Even their present distinctly finite future was

preferable to reprocessing as crude regen-inf biomass. It sometimes occurred to Emiousha that Rhodenet's dysfunction was severe even by House Meddhoran's standards.

Irritated, she forced herself out onto the Netherweald. Pebbles ground underfoot, over and over, a countdown in crunched numbers,*still* forty-seven paces as she set her hand upon the metal bar and drew back the entrance vault portcullis.

Once inside, she removed the blinkers and stowed them within an inner pocket of her peignoir before taking the steps leading up into the rest of the chapterhouse - up one tier, then another, then a third. At the thirteenth landing she came to the ingress of the nosocomion, now a chamber just like any other. All that high end technology had devolved along with everything else, remora and gietesphere regressing to scratchy, near useless code. The original aesculapian mechanism had reduced to crude, wooden catafalques with Ecclesiast Thraenrellis fussing around, trying hard to make the remaining housedays of her charges as bearable as practical with what resources she could muster. These resources amounted to waxy soap, water, and optimism.

Emiousha hesitated, wondering whether she should look in. Lavell had been unconscious last she saw, and Insoleanis had entered the secondary phase of the blight, sweating and rambling about animals and great water courses. It seemed unlikely that either of them would be in any sense improved, and her presence would not alter this unfortunate fact.

She continued, increasingly shorter breaths and muscles protesting, up another thirteen gloomy tiers of dirt, dust and wood formerly comprising the vertex of an apeirotope intersection connecting all parts of the House. At length she came to the air gallery which she entered from below, rising up through the floor. The chamber occupied the apex of the chapterhouse, a whole tier walled in with mullioned glass, great rafters brooding in the roof space. It had been the last chamber to regress, excepting possibly the breeding catacomb, but no-one had seen *that* for a while.

'Well met, Emiousha.' Laethynrisa allowed the Kithriarch to fully emerge from the sack trap before addressing the Drudges - one at each end of the air gallery holding up a tapestry, blank clay faces and heavy brows but nothing resembling eyes.

She raised her palms, miming elevation. 'Higher. We need to secure the material to the eaves. It's really not that complicated.'

The Drudges straightened their limbs, further hoisting the bellum notitia

without quite grasping what was required. This tapestry told of the anchoring in terms framed so as to appeal to a newly loomed childe. The threads writhed, changing colour as woven timeships swam after swarming Yssgaroth, fabric monstrosities sewn back inside a black circle representing the caldera, the singularity at the heart of established history.

Laethynrisa appeared suddenly exhausted. Unable to offer further direction, she slumped into a cathedra, letting the Drudges continue to find difficulty with this most basic of tasks. She had always been small and pale, but she now seemed entirely drained of colour.

Emiousha went over, keeping her gaze to the floor, clear of the glass and the illusory Netherweald horrors which the bellum notitia would eclipse once hung. The question she needed to ask was lodged in her throat, kept hidden in fear of the reality it might summon into being.

Bad enough that the male line had withered upon the bough, but that a female childe should now fall to this killing blight...

1.4 (south)

It was the day Ome Ozmatli of the trecena Ce Izcuintli as reckoned by the Tonalpohualli calendar of the Mexica - *Two Monkey*, presiding Deities being Xochipilli, Xipe Totec and Quetzalcoatl. This was hardly an auspicious combination by which to embark upon travel, but there being only nine days left before the occasion of the impending New Fire Ceremony, Momacani was left with little choice. The capital, that is to say the great city of Tenochtitlan, was then stricken with matters of a nature requiring the attention of either himself or his colleagues. Lord Achicatzin, son of Axayacatl and as reliable a witness as one could wish to meet, had testified to having seen that unfortunate avatar of the Night Wind known as the Towering Man in the woodlands of Chapultepetl, and a certain Tlamacazqui had suffered a vision of fires in the temple of Chantico during some restless period of darkness, but these mysteries would simply have to wait. Momacani was presently bound to keep an appointment in the city of Xochimilco in the southern extent of the lakes, a commitment which pressed greatly upon his thoughts as he made his ascent of the hill.

Pausing his stride, he turned to consider Tenochtitlan, a city glowing white as a jewel beneath a punishing morning sun, enthroned at the heart of its lake in the fashion of a ruler upon his seat and mat. Beyond the waters, at the extremes of visibility he could see Ehecatepetl and the other hills of the north, and to the distant east a metropolitan sprawl skirting the slopes of

the Rain God's mountain marking the municipalities of Coatlinchan and Texcoco. On the west bank an outcrop of forest denoted the woodlands of Chapultepetl, with the cities of Tlacopan and Azcapotzalco a little further away.

There was a great power inherent to this land, a quality of vigour which eluded easy definition. Momacani so often found himself set him against sorcery and trickery, and was hardly prone to flights of fancy, but he knew that no sane person could behold this vision and doubt that it had been wrought by Gods in times past. The priest Ocotochtli had described the world of materials as a shadow cast from the philosophical realm, and sights such as this revealed truth in the old man's words.

Momacani wondered what vision would reveal the truth of one other pronouncement delivered by his former patron.

You will make war with the beast of the city, and the people will be grateful, and in this way will your fame be fortified.

He still had scant idea what it might portend, and this remained a source of frustration. Perhaps the beast would be revealed as Tenochtitlan itself, although Ocotochtli had not ordinarily been given towards such overwrought metaphors; *or* perhaps the beast would be its ruler.

Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin was a conceited and superstitious man, unpredictable and too fond of his own sovereignty. Four short years of his reign had set alarming new standards for regal eccentricity. With each new decree it became ever easier to see how one might desire war against such a person, with the prospect of success in such opposition looking all the more hopeless. Commoners were now obliged to observe the custom of setting eyes to the ground in Xocoyotzin's presence. Such vanity was reminiscent of the ill-fated Huemac, last ruler of the Toltecs, a man led into decadence by the sorcerer Tezcatlipoca, and who had thus brought about the destruction of his people*; and* Huemac had been the ninth to rule in Tollan just as this Motecuhzoma was ninth to take the seat and mat founded by Acamapichtli many years before.

Momacani now dedicated himself to his task, setting troubled thoughts from his head and feet to the path, resuming his ascent of the hill of Huixachtepetl. The acacia woodland gave way near the summit to rockier ground strewn with yellowing crab grass and leathery flourishes of maguey and nopal cacti. The clack of wood and calls of labour carried upon the breeze as workers went back and forth wearing only loincloths for protection, some bearing timber or matting, others with rope coiled over a

shoulder. Beyond this activity, the temple platform lay untouched and incomplete beneath a clutter of fresh carved stone.

'What business has a man of the Ixtilque here?'

The speaker stood at a little distance watching the work from the shade of a huexotl tree, a slight figure arrayed with the full quota of gold and jadeite ornamentation through ears, nose, and lower lip. He was with a group of palace officials, mountain wind making billowing flags of their cotton cloaks.

'If this work remains incomplete in but nine days it will be the business of *all the world*, if only for a lamentably short period of time.' Momacani did not know the official and made no concession to his rank. 'Our Lord overreaches himself as always, as did Huemac before him.'

'This Ixtilli is known to me.' The senior Lord Atlazol emerged from the huddle, speaking like jovial thunder. 'Momacani, do you now hunt improbable creatures upon these slopes?'

Wrath subsiding, Momacani ducked down to render the traditional greeting of an imaginary clod of soil picked from the ground and tossed back across one shoulder. 'I travel to Xochimilco and was keen to observe the progress of the temple. Sadly my fears are not set at ease.'

'Then you must polish your eye, my friend. The mountain itself will be our temple.' Atlazol smiled and indicated eagle vessels set upon sandy ground around the altar stone, just as they would be within a ceremonial courtyard. 'The years will be bound as planned. There has been no delay and you must dismiss this worry from whatever tally you maintain.'

Momacani watched as workers assembled a corral for those who would give sustenance, some cutting wood, others securing the logs with rope to form a stockade. 'There is talk that Lord Motecuhzoma presumes to delay the renewal of time by an entire solar year.'

'Chaff and straw.' The younger official barbed his words with thorns. 'Our time is beset with rumour and mystery. People should know better, not least those in the employ of the court.'

Atlazol laughed. 'Oh Tenquauhui, do not chastise a man for having eyes and ears, or for understanding very well how much is at stake during the last days of the xiuhmolpilli.'

'Then it is now acceptable to make a meal of such distasteful chatter?'

Biting his tongue, Momacani spoke slowly and without anger. 'This is Ce Tochtli, a year fated to famine and ruin just as our fathers will tell you.

Fifty-two years past, it was a Ce Tochtli year which brought our nation close to its end. This recent harvest has been so poor as to suggest history repeating, and I do not think that this idea is so very hard to understand.'

Tenquauhui refused to budge. 'The granaries are not full this year, although it is hardly the catastrophe of Ihuilcamina's reign; but the work of an Ixtilli is ever borne by water and carried by wind, so your lack of faith is not surprising to me.'

Atlazol smiled sweetly at his colleague. 'You are young, Tenquauhui, so shut up.'

Momacani bowed his head to show that no defence of his views were necessary, and no insult taken. He was accustomed to this sort of talk. The Ixtilque had been established during Ahuizotl's tenure, and it was no secret that the current administration regarded them as an extravagance.

'Besides,' - Atlazol's gaze remained fixed upon the younger official - 'we are at the dawn of a new xiuhmolpilli, Gods willing. Our entire way of life might end in but nine days if it does not go well for us, and only a fool could fail to appreciate the gravity of the situation.'

Tenquauhui gave no response, wandering away as though having lost interest.

'Forgive him. He is young and lacking in perspective.' Atlazol set a hand to Momacani's shoulder. 'Now really, I must ask what brings a man of the Ixtilque to Huixachtepetl?'

'As I have said, I wished only to see what progress has been made with the temple.'

'Nothing more?'

'Nothing more.'

Atlazol's gaze went to the heavens in a silent prayer of thanks. 'I confess that when I saw you here, I anticipated the worst. We are all of us made fearful by the days ahead, I would say.'

'These are troubling times.'

'So I presume something of that which makes them troubling is to be found in Xochimilco?'

Momacani shook his head, amused by the suggestion. 'I am to meet with a minor relative of Macuilmalinaltzin. I do not yet know his story.'

'Perhaps one who has encountered sacred forces?'

'Or more likely one who has encountered *intoxicating* forces. If it were

not for this person having friends in high places, I doubt I would be obliged to make this journey.'

Atlazol stared at the ground, disconsolate. 'I could not enjoy your line of work, my friend.'

'Some days I see the dung gatherers as they go past in their boats and I suffer great envy,' - Momacani's face fell to a contemplative frown - 'although of course there is the matter of my neighbour with his large family and great enthusiasm for chilli peppers...'

An argument had broken out amongst a couple of labourers, one shouting and cursing at another who stood holding a wooden pole, a look of disdain upon his face.

Atlazol pulled himself up to full height. 'It appears I am required to supply counsel.'

'I too must be on my way.' Momacani offered a cursory farewell and made for the path by which he had arrived as squabbling voices fell to sullen accusation and testy defence.

At a song's length of footsteps he came to the bank of the lake whereupon he took up his oar, went in amongst the reeds, and walked the canoe out from the shallows towards clear water. Once the waves were at waist height, he climbed in and paddled, setting the prow to the south, towards the dark green line of chinampas flourishing along the distant shoreline. As his body settled into the mundane rhythm of paddling, his thoughts returned to their earlier state of unease, a bothersome sense of something new and unfamiliar upon the face of the world. The thought cycled upon itself, fading to background detail and leading nowhere, yet *still* he could not entirely let it go. It was this same tenacity which had once decided his vocation, this reluctance to accept a comforting answer. He had no love for nebulous mysticism, or that tendency to dispense with a mystery as purely metaphysical in lieu of efforts to reach understanding.

— So this is where it will end.

He ceased paddling and set the oar across himself, looking from one side to the other, then behind. The closest vessel lay at some distance, a hunter spearing water birds, so far that their quacking protests were barely felt. No person was near and yet he had heard the phrase clearly.

Except he had not truly *heard* it, for it had not been carried to his ear, but neither had it seemed entirely like a stray thought. Its origin was as elusive as its means of conduct, and around him was only water and

mountains and sky. He closed his eyes and became aware of a familiar sensation, like that of waking and knowing that one is not alone in a room even before any other person has spoken.

Resigned to no greater understanding than this, Momacani took up his paddle and resumed his progress towards Xochimilco. If there was an answer to be had, doubtless it would present itself when the time was ready.

1.5

There is mud splattered across his visor obstructing his vision. He clears it with a gloved hand and sees Palatine Sendax, but it's already too late inside her blot of accelerated time, internal organs extruded out into vacuum like a fast shred, blood on the inside of the glass. She died months ago.

Some way beyond the evolving sculptural causualty, the body of Palatine Enten ossifies into the work of centuries.

Receptors in Palatine Goralschai's array notify him of a vacuole about to close fourteen femtoclicks to his left. He dives, hitting the control for the static regulator as he does so, hoping the numbers will even out. The femtoclick expires and he draws his first breath since Sendax caught the spiral, leaning back against the inner shell.

The recording has failed, most likely fallout from the spiral impact. He can recall a unit of five but there were almost certainly more when the timeship dropped them here. He is trying to decide whether fourteen was the standard, or whether the enemy could have retrovised that too - which would of course rule out the hope of comparing records maintained on the Homeworld. In any case, the one factor of which he can be reasonably certain is that he has survived.

This would be a secured world, but now they will have to wait for another twist of the history books unwinding the atrocity back and hoping the pieces fall into place. The noosphere has been converted to noble state, effectively impervious to prior cause; an infallible idea until the enemy noticed they could write their own assault clusters into the fuel material of the conversion process.

He had signalled this possibility to Vicereine Iseult at conception, to no avail. You are not suitably prepared to deploy narrative etherware*, she informed him,* and in any case I hardly think it will be necessary. The unit

will carry static regulators and these will be sufficient.

They were not, and he considers this now: staying in one place, lacking the impetus to move forward much like the Vicereine who apparently believed the war would be won by drowning everyone in a sea of protocol.

The vacuole tears and he is dragged out by a clawed fist the size of his head. The exterior has been pushed forward in his absence, subject to evolition, volcanic crowns tearing the landscape apart like some angry geological Academician who has just discovered an insulting article about himself.

The enemy are recognisably human, absurd armour spawned from some pre-industrial fetish, brass and rivet machismo, cultural infantilism. If only they could truly see themselves they would surely understand just why there could be no place for them in this or indeed any *history; but pathetic or otherwise, there are three of them and they have the upper hand.*

They speak, apparently too stupid to realise the redundancy of such an action so soon after the detonation of their own syntactic device. The concepts leak through in a vague sense, at least enough to convince the Palatine that he must find a means to kill them in as short a time as possible.

They want to understand him, it would seem. There follows further supposedly empathic detritus, but he feigns ignorance, using it to mask his repulsion.

A fourth creature unifies the group, a biomorph with huge eyes, psychologically coercive but missing the point that it appears meaningless to anyone from a non-parturitive magisteria. It is crying in an expectation of cutting to his compassionate core, succeeding only in supplementing injury with the insulting supposition that he might respond to such animal crudity.

2.1 (east)

Motecuhzoma sent them there. His servants went to the cave at Atlixocan. He sent them to meet the devil Huemac. The old men would say that a ghost appeared each night there to take people into the underworld. That is what they said.

The servants went into the cave and Huemac appeared to them. 'Why does your King wish to come to this place?' the devil asked them. 'Does he think he will find gold and coral and precious feathers? Does he think he will be esteemed?'

Primo had read this before, or at least a version of the same story. It was one of a core group of oral traditions which tended to reoccur amongst various accounts set down when the Franciscan monks first arrived in New Spain. This story, although unusual for its substituting a Death God with Huemac the last Toltec ruler, was not of itself remarkable.

He flipped the book over to consider the cover - *Codex Chalchiuhtlatonac: Mythic History and Politics of the Tenango Valley and Post-Classic Mexico*, he read; then a stylised group of pictograms - the dot standing for one, a hand clutching a reed bundle, then a field upon an island - the Nahuatl name of the sixteenth century author.

The glass door at the end of the hotel lobby swung open. A couple came in from the street. German, their surname was Aachen; she was called Barbara; their Spanish was passable but not amazing and they were in room number seventy-six. This was the sum of Primo's knowledge.

He took their key from the peg board and held it out by its red perspex tag. Barbara Aachen smiled and thanked him. He watched them take the lift and then resumed reading.

He had accumulated a few of these old sixteenth century accounts now, *Codex Chimalpopoca*, Durán's *Historia*, Mendieta, and the volumes of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* that had been published back in the 1970s; but this one, this *Codex Chalchiuhtlatonac* was inscrutable even by the standards of the genre. No wonder it had taken so long for him to get around to it.

The sorcerer afflicted him. They say it was Tezozomoc. This was in Coatlinchan which today we call San Miguel Coatlinchan. Acamapichtli hid there.

The Mexica went to Culhuacan. They asked the Lords 'where is our fame to be found?' That was when Acamapichtli went to live amongst them. His wife was Ilancueitl. They hid in Coatlinchan with the seat and mat of Acolmiztli. This was the year 13-Reed (1375).

Tezozomoc sent his warriors. They went to Olac Xochimilco, Chalco Atenco, Atotonilco. They did not find the Mexica in those places. They went to Otompan and Tzonpanco but Acamapichtli was not in those places. He was not there.

Acamapichtli was struck down in Coatlinchan. They caused his soul to grieve. They wounded him and made sacrifices so that the wound could not be healed. The wound was at his seat, in his back. They made sorcery upon him and caused him to fall.

Primo stared at the words, then read them again. His dream, his *vision* - whatever it was: this was the source. This *had* to be where it came from.

Huitzilopochtli made a demon. He made it from pale wood like the moon. He put the breath and the life in it. He said 'you will go to the east and go into the earth. That is where your duty lies, and that is why I have made you live.' The demon was called "Fire in the Serpent." He was summoned by Huetepol, Nenecuani, Ehecatztintli and Tohcual.

The devil pierced him with thorns. He encouraged Acamapichtli to perform penitence. He made himself appear like a jaguar. Tezozomoc knew nothing of this. The devil healed Acamapichtli then said 'it is done.'

Then the sorcerer went east. He poured the blood into a sweat bath. Temazcalteci saw it. She said 'why do you do this?' but before she heard an answer he had gone. He went to the north then, and then he went to the west and the south, and then he hid himself away inside a barrel cactus. That is what I have been told.

He makes a twin appear. The twin is the cause of Tezozomoc's work. They are both of them afflicted. They are in pain.

The twin made faces appear within people. He gave them their breath and their movement and that is how he worked his trickery. The death was taken out of him. He went from one place to another asking 'where shall I go?' and 'what is to become of me?'

Typically the narrative had succumbed to the characteristic rambling surrealism of his ancestors, so Primo closed the book and set it down upon the counter. This account had been transcribed in 1572 by the Franciscan Father Bartolomé de Acosta, his source a Nahua elder of Tenango who had

pointed to pictures in his painted books and tried to describe what was happening in halting Spanish. The metaphors did not always translate well, and certain ideas were a poor fit for the black and white landscape of New Spain, the absolutes of the Catholic faith. *Codex Chalchiuhtlatonac* was not unusual in this respect.

Nevertheless, this was clearly some fragment of the story that had been playing on his mind, the cave and the ruler and the mysterious Fire in the Serpent. He rolled the name around, translating it into a tentative Nahuatl *Coahualxiuh*, but still it remained meaningless. He returned to the passage throughout the rest of his shift, but after eight hours decided it had revealed all it was likely to reveal for the present.

The journey home was conducted by a succession of peseros running down long dark streets rapidly thinning of late evening traffic. Within forty-five minutes he was again crossing the Zocalo before the great idol of the River Goddess, tired, a little hungry, and eager to get away from the chill of midnight. The city had grown quiet but for the noise of distant road works, the soft roar of urban ocean. Primo took the corner down Avenida Morelos and was soon stood before the communal doorway, fumbling his key from a back pocket. The window immediately above his head was unlit, meaning his mother had gone to bed. Sometimes she would stay awake and sew clothes, but not tonight. He twisted the lock and went into the warm interior.

Another few minutes were spent negotiating doors that made no sound until one desired hush, and then he was sat at the kitchen table eating a cold pork and egg taco with rice found in the refrigerator. The house was silent but for a clock ticking away in some other room and the occasional nocturnal grunt of his mother turning over in bed. Chewing, he reached down to pull *Codex Chalchiuhtlatonac* from his bag. He wedged it open with the edge of the plate - which page hardly seemed to matter given that they might just as well have been in random order - and took another bite.

The five points of our world were the east, the north, the west, the south, and here in centre. That was how he went around them. He went in that order against the sun. First he went to the east where today there is Chollolan and the land of the Huexotzinca. That is where the twins were made. He made them in the place where the sun leaves Tlalocan.

More of the same, Primo thought, *more twins, more people doing things there.* Chollolan was Cholula de Rivadavia, and he would himself be doing things there tomorrow. Specifically he would be knocking at his grandmother's door and biting his tongue when she started telling him

about spirits and how everything was better before they invented electricity. He would need to get to bed soon to be rested for the journey, but it had been a long, tiring shift and he would be asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

He munched the taco and let his eyes slip across the page, but he'd had enough for one day, and whatever point Father Acosta's friend had been making wasn't coming across.

There was a noise, like scuffling paper.

Primo looked over the side of the table, running his eyes along the edge of the linoleum expecting to see a mouse or a roach. There was an orange beetle laboriously clambering along the skirting, a pinauiztli, an old bad luck omen if you subscribed to that way of thinking. It couldn't have made the noise, and he found himself too tired to care about it being in the house. He turned back to his book and read some more, or tried to read some more.

The twin lived in the east. He was set in the place of the one who had been sent to the north. He was placed there in the manner of the cuckoo which is a type of bird. In that place he caused things to grow, he made faces appear within people, he recovered them to life for this was a part of his essence. This was that quality which we know as the ixihtec in our Nahuatl language. This is why we say he had the ixihtec of a planter or a germinator. It was his work.

There was that noise again, something rooting around inside the waste bin next to the refrigerator; not a roach by any means, perhaps mice, or even a rat.

Primo looked about for a weapon, settling for a walking cane hung upon the back of the door. He stole over to the bin, ready to beat the life out of something. He had nothing against rats, but not *here* in his mother's house. Steeling himself against the sting of diseased teeth, he slid fingers beneath the rim of the flip-top and sent it flying, cane raised high.

Francisco, his mother's cardinal, sat blinking and tweeting on a nest of soggy newspaper and bacon rinds, ruffling his feathers and looking dazed.

Primo set the cane down and cupped his hands around the little bird, lifting him up for closer inspection. There was dried blood upon his breast and wings, but otherwise he seemed okay - certainly pretty good for a bird he'd believed dead six hours earlier. He stroked the fluffy crested head with a fingertip and carefully took his patient into the front room. It was dark, and he had no free hand by which he could reach the switch, but the light

from the street was enough to reveal where his mother had set the cage back upon its stand. No doubt she'd already had thoughts about Francisco's successor.

The bird went back into his cage and sat there in the sawdust. He no longer seemed so confused. Primo fetched a half bottle of water and a crumpled bag of seed from the kitchen. As he stocked up the feeder, he noticed the cupboard over by the window. His mother had set an empty flower vase upon the nearest corner in an obvious effort to make life more difficult for the cat in the event of further assassination attempts, although it didn't seem likely. Señor Mullido was plump and fluffy and generally docile. It seemed too much of a coincidence that his attack should happen on a day tainted by some indefinable trace of the malign, something Primo felt but could not entirely identify. He recalled the pinauiztli beetle and felt somehow foolish.

Finishing up, he gently closed the door, tidied the kitchen, then went to his room. He tossed his shirt over the back of a chair and stood before the window, gazing out through the mosquito screen, savouring cool air upon his shoulders and across his chest. The city was dark, a million tiny lights spattering the nocturnal void, here and there a blood red star surmounting an inky patch of black denoted the smaller hills and their radio masts. The invisible horizon slipped silent as a serpent across the surface of the world.

Primo looked at Mexico City, and Mexico City looked at him.

2.2 (north)

Todd had known Selena since junior high, and maybe that was the problem. Could be what had kept them together was only habit, just the two of them rolling along the same track because it was the easiest way to go. Sure, they still liked the same things and laughed at the same jokes, but after eight years it seemed that might not count for a whole lot. They had been twelve when they met. Now they were twenty. All things pass, and for that matter Todd had been pretty tight with Hector, but those two could meet right now and most likely there wouldn't be much mileage in a mutual love of *Batman* cartoons.

He missed Selena so much it hurt, but could no longer tell if it was real, or if he missed her like he missed the house where he was raised on Boxwood; and now the crazy thing was he couldn't even picture her face. He could say how it looked, get a general impression like she was somebody he'd seen on a TV show, but the detail was gone. Three weeks

apart and his own wife had turned into an old photograph; and what really stung was how after that whole break-up war zone, he could barely even recall why it came about. Whatever the final straw had been, it was lost in the firestorm.

He released the grip of the pressure hose. The tempest died to a trickle. He raised his goggles to make the customary inspection, and after a minute decided he was done. The chairs were pretty nice, he had to admit - traditional banister backs and birch by the look of it. Johnson figured they might be over a hundred years old, so they would have seen a whole parade of appreciative asses in their time.

Gordy came by, boots splashing in the run off. 'Looking good, man.'

Todd nodded. 'Yeah. They do.'

'You saw these before they got dipped? Bright purple like damn Barney, son.' His brow wrinkled in comic disbelief. 'Then again, I seen the colours *you people* paint your houses, so Lord knows why I'm telling *your* ass.'

'So I'm Mexican when you got something funny to say.' Todd held back a smile. 'You keep that shit coming. La Raza gonna be real interested when I hand in my report.'

Gordy sniggered, picking up two chairs by their backs. 'Let me help you out here.'

Todd took the third, and they both went across to the far side of the shop floor.

'So I'll bet you ain't yet called that woman of yours, huh?' The senior worker's face softened to concern. 'Three weeks, man. That ain't healthy, you know?'

'I called but ain't get no answer.' Todd lied. He wasn't getting into the electronics thing.

'So you call again.'

'Maybe later.' Todd hoisted his chair up top of a chest of drawers. 'You wanna give me a hand with that wardrobe back there. I figure I'd get it done then finish up.'

'Sure.' Gordy stacked his two before a circular table.

Selena knew that Todd had no phone, and that they didn't work so well for him. She wouldn't be waiting on a call, no matter what. He would go around in person, although he had no idea what he was going to say. He didn't want to sound like he didn't care, but then he didn't want her to think

he was losing sleep over this shit.

Finished and washed up, he found Justin waiting by his car, sat upon the hood working some game. There was a housefly buzz of music leaking from cream coloured earphones which died as Todd drew near. Justin was the sort of guy you *really* noticed, tall with dark olive skin but a strangely Caucasian face like all those Afro, Mexican, and Samoan genes got tired of arguing and had settled for *default whiteboy* in the absence of a better idea.

Todd looked at his friend's jeans and tee, all dust and plaster. 'Don't sit on my ride, man.'

Justin grinned and directed a sideways glance at the Chevy Caprice Classic with its finish of traffic grime and bird poop. 'Oh yeah, 'cause I see how you just had it cleaned.'

Todd climbed in, unlocked the other door. Justin frowned at his game and tossed it on the dash. 'Appreciate this, buddy. Took mine in for an oil change this morning and now they saying I need new tires, so I'm kind of humped for getting home right now.'

'Uh huh?' Todd's head twisted between side mirror and shoulder as he reversed. If he had a phone, or was at least able to use one, this kind of thing might not happen.

'I signed up for the reserves.'

'Reserves?'

'Fort Sam. Should hear before the end of next week.'

'Okay.' Todd shifted into first and made for the exit, wondering whether he should offer some sort of congratulation. 'Never figured you for wanting to *be all you can be* is all.'

'So how's your girl?' Justin hit the lever down the side of his seat and leaned back as they pulled out. 'I *know* you ain't gonna tell me you ain't spoke yet.'

'Don't ask.'

'Still with your moms, huh?' He scratched a scab of plaster from his jeans. 'Guess it's a good thing some ways, you being there to look after her and all.'

'Sometimes she's okay, but it don't seem like she's getting no better.' They drew up to the intersection with Austin Highway. Todd reminded himself that this wasn't so much out of his way if he was going to call on Selena. 'Days are fine but after dark it's real bad.'

'Tell her go see a doctor, man. You all can afford that, right?'

'My moms is old school, you know what I'm saying?'

'So tell her go see a curandera. It ain't like they hard to find in this town.'

The lights flashed green, the car moved on, and Todd sighed. 'She all set on visiting with grandma down in Mexico. Grandma's one of those old witches with herbs and candles, but she's only gonna say my moms is allergic to moonlight or some foolishness.'

Justin shrugged. 'Then maybe she is. Way I see it you gotta keep an open mind.'

'Sure, but best you watch your damn brain don't fall out.'

'Well maybe it would do her some good anyway, getting to see her fam and all.'

Todd gave him a look, serious face. 'You kidding? That's near on two thousand miles, and it ain't like she can just get on some plane and walk the rest; and anyways, that whole country is crazy right now, all the cartels running things and the cops all in on that shit.'

'That's in the north, man. Always been that way along the border.'

Todd felt himself bristle, resenting his friend for getting stuck on this shit like it was *his* business. Mom was getting on in years. More and more she'd been thinking on the old country like it was some long lost promised land. Yet the way she used to tell it, coming north and getting married was the best decision she ever made. Two decades back, she hadn't been able to leave the place fast enough. Maybe US healthcare could stand some improvement, but at least the doctor didn't start your consultation by setting some chicken on fire.

Justin leant forward to play with the air conditioning on the dash, twisting the control back and forth with puzzlement on his face. 'Trying to turn this down some. I ain't feel so good.'

'That ain't work in a long time, man.' Todd regarded his passenger and wondered what the hell was wrong with people, then pulled over. 'Anyway, this is where your ass gets out.'

'Need to get that fixed.' Justin stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Another four minutes and Todd was at his home, and there was Selena out front washing her car. She looked different, older, but it was just clothes no doubt - downbeat slacks, more sensible than usual and less jewellery. That was good, sobering. She hadn't treated this cooling off

period like some non-stop party, so most likely she had come to the same conclusion as himself.

She must have seen him, but she just carried on washing the car, up and down with the sponge and then bending to dip it in a bucket of suds. Todd gripped the handle but found his hand frozen, not quite ready to make the move. He had no idea what he was going to say. Maybe just *sorry*; if not exactly sorry for something he'd done - on account of the fact that he didn't even know what that was - then sorry for the way things turned out.

He worked. He paid bills. He took out the trash and kept the yard clean. He never even looked at another woman. He was fine with her friends; most of them were *their* friends. Maybe not every night was a party, but it wasn't like they never went anywhere. They ate out a few evenings each month, and they went away on vacation when they could afford it. This was all crazy. These last three weeks couldn't have happened for *no* reason.

Todd stepped out onto the asphalt, heart going like a drum, light-headed. He crossed the road, fingers absently scratching at some imaginary piece of crap upon his brow like *here he was just crossing the street as he would be any other day*.

'Hey there.' He tried to sound as casual as he could, knowing full well it was a doomed effort.

Selena looked up, cautious. 'Hey.'

The response stopped him in his tracks. No trace of malice in her face.

She spoke again. 'Can I help you?'

'Listen baby, I er...' - *Can I help you?* What the hell? - 'I guess we should talk.'

'Okay.' She drew out the word like a bank clerk reaching for the panic button. 'You want to talk to Nathan?'

Todd couldn't understand how this was going so wrong, why the parts weren't coming together. He could see himself trapped in a movie, falling in slow motion and helpless to stop; and *Nathan* - the guy from over the way who always used to asked about that damn mesquite tree out in the yard; *then* it struck him that she hadn't meant their neighbour.

'Selena, you ain't making sense.'

Her eyes frosted over. 'How about you tell me just who you are and what it is you want.'

This wasn't happening. 'Selena, it's me.'

Blank look, nervous. The house door flew open. A tall black guy stepped out from the porch, shirt with a tie loose at the collar, probably just got in from work. There was a child in his arms, couldn't be no more than a year old.

'Can we help you?' Not a question but a challenge.

Todd stared at the stranger now stood upon *his own* front yard.

'This is Nathan,' - Selena's eyes dwindled to sharp, dark points - 'my husband.'

'You're *married?*'

Just three weeks apart and here she was with some guy he'd never even seen before.

Nathan came forward, holding the child close and drawn to full height as he stood with Selena: the alpha male protecting his kin. This was no intruder. This was someone with every right to be there. 'Sir, we been married two years, and I'd appreciate it if you would state your business.'

2.3 (west)

The regressive influence of the Netherweald had made a strange and unfamiliar place of House Meddhoran. Childrene loomed to expect a gietesphere in every chamber and architexture access whenever it took their fancy were slow to acclimate to the technological austerity of life beyond the Homeworld, although acclimate they did in the absence of choice.

The backwards revision of the athenæum was, however, another matter entirely. It had been an information store and remained so, although all the lattices and gieteforms had long since devolved to hand-written text bound with cured animal hide - by whose hand was never determined. Each part of the chapterhouse sloughed off information as it regressed to an earlier form; and that information coalesced within the athenæum, condensing into raw archemathic code scratched upon rough, yellowing paper - the base numbers of quintessence transposed to ink. Shelves blossomed to accommodate more and more books, blooming from the internal architecture in vast reefs, a bubbling coral of dark wood encrusted with a billion volumes of hand-written code, and space itself distorting to contain the growth.

The analytic remora that Emiousha had fitted during her primary loomstide, for one example, now occupied four peculiarly bowed shelves of tracts and folios. Dorhira, the Biblarian, had graded most of the

regressed material, cataloguing which systems had devolved to which group of documents. Some of it remained serviceable, providing one was prepared to copy and catechise the code by hand - as Rhodenet was doing out in the Netherweald at the site of the flaw.

Prior to its regression to a series of pamphlets, Emiousha's remora had revealed nothing when the first of the males turned to ash. On the issue of the deceased, the Kithriarch was wrestling gusts of wind and she knew it, but a different matter had brought her to the athenæum.

For now, this different matter was itself temporarily forgotten, displaced by a movement in the shadows, something small emerging from the space along the top of the nearest shelf, crawling and stumbling. The creature was an invertebrate of some order, a reddish orange carapace and feathered antennae.

Here was another puzzle. Nothing of this description had been present when they fled the Homeworld. Nor did it seem likely that any part of the architexture could devolve into something so overtly biological. She averted her eyes without knowing why, her gaze plumbing the depths from one textual archipelago to another which had recently distended from the ceiling like a stalactite - although *floor* and *ceiling*had lately become devalued terms here. Two figures returned her curiosity from a great distance, dark skin, basic garments, males but not childrene.

'Well met, Kithriarch. You seem more troubled than usual.' Gedarra occupied a cathedra, clutching a ragged portfolio that had once served for the tracking element of a votive eutheroid. She wore the traditional red and gold peignoir of Omniscian. Her somewhat chiselled features betrayed amusement. 'Is there any way in which I may offer assistance?'

The two strangers were gone. Emiousha looked along the top of the shelf but saw no creature of any description. She considered the wraiths of the Netherweald and wondered if they had begun to infect the interior.

But these were concerns for another time. 'I find myself obliged to seek your aid.'

Gedarra took a moment to respond. 'I anticipate your concern as being the matter of our maintaining a dialogue with Rhodenet, unless I am mistaken.'

The Kithriarch conceded that it was so. 'You anticipate well.'

'Rhodenet and myself were loomed with the same cognitive foundation voidwork. It is no secret. I understand that I am an obvious choice.'

'You are willing to undertake catechism?'

'I am willing.' Still holding her portfolio, Gedarra moved away, heading for one of the more distant shelves. 'Dorhira has found the significant collection. I will begin this housenight.'

Emiousha followed in silence.

Gedarra and Rhodenet's cognition would be entangled allowing for remote communication even across divergent universes - providing both locations had grown from the same basic archemathic quintessence. The operation might once have been performed in the blink of an eye by means of gietesphere, but Gedarra would be required to spend many housedays going over the code, manually catechising her own biodata.

'This is very much to your credit, Gedarra.'

The Omniscian made a dismissive gesture. 'Rhodenet's sacrifice is the greater.'

'That is true.' Emiousha might have pointed out that Rhodenet's grand gesture was not of entirely altruistic design, but this seemed too trivial to warrant mention. 'I trust you will appraise me of any new development; and I wish you good fortune.'

They bowed then parted, each wondering if the other really saw currency in such formalities. Homeworld tradition ran deep despite everything.

Exiting the athenæum, Emiousha ascended five tiers to the nosocomion. Therein she found Ecclesiast Thraenrellis and Laethynrisa. The Ecclesiast, an unusually tall female with short black hair wearing a grey pellicule, stood fussing over the latter.

Despite her best efforts, the Kithriarch's gaze was immediately and unfortunately drawn to those catafalques set against the wall. Insoleanis lay upon the first, eyes closed, chest barely rising beneath the dull blue robe. The other catafalque was empty, although its valance bore the smears of a hasty effort to clear grey, powdery remains. The blight had consumed four males and was about to take another. It began with overpowering fatigue, progressing to delirium, and once the sufferer lost consciousness they were past help. Within housedays the body would be just ash. With the chapterhouse in its present state, the childrene had no means of divining either the effect or cause of the blight let alone a preventative; but then Herrare had been taken *before* the regression, and the condition had resisted analysis even then. The breeding engine had not only failed to

bring him back, but had ceased to contain any record of his biodata or his ever having been loomed. The blight struck without warning, resisted all possible treatment, then left remains that weren't even matter in any conventional sense so far as the architexture was concerned.

Perhaps those deceased became part of the Netherweald in some sense, that too being comprised of something other than matter.

The Ecclesiast spoke without much enthusiasm. 'Well met, Kithriarch.'

The greeting had begun to irritate Emiousha but she said nothing. Her gaze settled upon Laethynrisa sat upon the catafalque, complexion not so pale as it had been in the air gallery.

For some peculiar reason it seemed preferable to address Thraenrellis.

'Is she in pain?' None of them had experienced physical illness, and nor had they been loomed to expect such crudely biological problems. It seemed perverse to even ask such questions. 'Does she still suffer fatigue?'

'Laethynrisa is presently a little disorientated.' The Ecclesiast held a cloth to her patient's brow. 'Even so, I feel almost certain that she is able to answer your enquiries herself.'

Feeling profoundly in error, Emiousha addressed the childe on the catafalque hoping that she had only imagined the amusement her discomfort had inspired. 'You have experienced pain?'

Laethynrisa patted her abdomen and nodded in the affirmative. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes watered but she did not appear unduly distressed. Her words, when they came, were soft and lacked conviction. 'No male spoke of physical discomfort.'

'This might be something new, hopefully something which is not quite so final.' Thraenrellis shrugged, perhaps realising how naive this sounded. 'I can't help wonder whether the entire process might explain how House Paradox ended as it did. Perhaps we are only in a transitional phase, and they too suffered their own Netherweald when first they fled.'

The Kithriarch stared, bewildered. 'From which orifice do you offer this theory?'

'Since we left the Homeworld, those qualities which once defined us have been lost.'

This was not the first Emiousha had heard of such speculation, and it inspired her anger. 'There was ever something deeply unwholesome about that group. Please disabuse yourself of the notion that we could share common ground with such creatures. If the process by which House

Meddhoran was removed from the Homeworld bears comparison—'

'The Ordnance-Tetrarch used technology developed by House Paradox, technology by which we would have been safely hidden away in an alter-time structure of our own had it worked as promised. With respect, Kithriarch, the parallels are difficult to miss. Our kind have never flourished far from the tree.'

Emiousha felt her blood pressure increase. 'The Nemontemi is *not* the Eleven-Day Empire!'

'Indeed not, because when we thought to examine the records, it turned out that the thirteen days supposedly missing from that particular calendar were there all along, and weren't actually *missing* after all. Something of an oversight, wouldn't you say?'

'There was never anywhere to go.' It seemed that Laethynrisa was talking to herself, but it served to break the rhythm of the argument, for which she looked immediately guilty. 'Sorry.'

A cry rang up from the depths of the chapterhouse, the portcullis slamming down in the entrance vault. The childrene regarded one another, recognising the futility of their exchange.

'Who was out in the Netherweald?'

Footfalls tripped up through the chapterhouse in response to Emiousha's question, then a terrible hammering at the egress. Arven stumbled into the nosocomion in a tangle of robes, shrieking and weeping, his eyes wild. The Kithriarch snatched a carafe of water from Laethynrisa's catafalque and hurried over to empty it into the howling face of the male. This constituted a legitimate aesculapian treatment by present standards.

Thraenrellis took Arven by the shoulders but he collapsed, writhing, beating at the floor.

'The woman screaming...' - his testimony was lost beyond this introduction of the main character, edited to gibberish with gulping sobs of terror. There had been a female in the Netherweald, dressed in feathers and screaming, her face painted red and black - this was as much sense as could be made. Clearly this had been another variant form of wraith.

The Kithriarch fetched a cup of water from the wellspring whilst the Ecclesiast pulled at Arven, trying to get him to stand as he burbled the same litany over and over. She held the cup to his lips, forcibly so as to encourage him to drink. He succumbed, hands fumbled, finding the vessel for himself as his nerves began an ascent towards reason.

The monsters of the Netherweald were a function of the environment. They had been here since House Meddhoran first embedded itself in this tiny inexplicable universe, but always as an unexpressed sense of terror, a fear of something seen moving at the corner of one's eye.

Arven, it seemed, had been witness to something more tangible.

2.4 (south)

The lakebound town of Xochimilco sweltered beneath a blanket of fat, grey clouds in stark contrast to the blue with which the heavens had been blessed earlier in the day. Sweat beaded Momacani's back and soaked his cotton cloak as he moored the boat. This being the hunting season of Quecholli, the harvest was done but the chinampas still required maintenance. All around people were picking out weeds, dredging mud from the lake bed and priming their land ready for planting during Tititl. Nearby, a new chinampa was being sunk - a common sight further out but unusual here at the heart of the canal network. Men stripped to their breeches splashed in the mud, scooping silt into reed baskets then emptying it across the waterlogged plot, gradually raising it above the level of the lake; others planting sapling willows around its boundary so as to root the sodden earth in place.

Momacani studied the low adobe buildings before him - flat roofed or else thatched - and recalled the directions he had been given. Duly orientated, he set off through the market, then into the arterial avenues of the town. Atonal's dwelling, when at last he came upon it, was unusually low, with much of the outer wall long since crumbled leaving just a weave of reeds encrusted with dry clay. It barely seemed habitable, much less the home of one bearing familial ties to the regional governor.

The entrance was hung with ratty fabric which dispensed a crouching elder, his face knotted with the belligerence of his years - a sum quite clearly in excess of fifty-two. His ash grey hair was cut short and his robe bore witness to eating habits long since done with concessions to grace. He smiled, bowing low to make a show of tossing the customarily imagined piece of dirt over a shoulder. 'Greetings to you. I am Atonal. You are the priest dressed in black, I would say.'

The Ixtilli herded the man back inside, himself entering as the elder took to a reed mat. 'If you mean to ask whether I have come to listen to your tale, then that is so.'

Atonal chuckled, bidding that his guest be seated. 'Are you not a priest

dressed in black? Will you not say I have seen only a star distorted by marsh gas and must henceforth remain silent?'

'I am here to listen to that which you tell me.'

'How old would you say I am?'

'I would say you have lived more than fifty-two years.'

'I have endured for sixty-five years upon this earth.' Atonal's smile faded as he made ready to broach the source of his misery. 'In the year Ce Calli I had been alive for one full cycle of the calendar, and I attained the age at which one is allowed to take alcohol with impunity because, frankly, no-one believes that it matters much what you do after that.'

The Ixtilli wondered where this was going. If the elder had become drunk, thereby opening himself up to the influence of the sacred, then it was his own fault.

The old man continued 'I was old and yet I did not wish to die, and so following in the footsteps of rumours and stories, I effected to visit the cave at Atlixocan.'

Momacani groaned inwardly, now certain of just where this story was going.

'In that place I met with Lord Huemac himself - as I see you are not surprised to learn. There I secured an additional thirteen years of life in exchange for service in the realms beyond when my time is all run out, as it will be just three days hence.'

This was not the first time that Momacani had been told of a supposed supernatural encounter at Atlixocan, and it would surely not be the last. 'So what is your wish at this juncture?'

Atonal scowled upon finding himself obliged to state the obvious. 'My wish is that I be freed of obligation. I do not believe the contract was worth those words by which it was spoken.'

'Upon what grounds do you state this?'

'I do not think the person was genuinely Lord Huemac, the last Tlatoani of the Toltecs.'

'In what form did he appear before you?'

'He appeared as a colossus and as black as the night sky.'

Perhaps even as black as Tezcatlipoca is said to be when he appears in the aspect of Huemac, Momacani thought to himself, although he did not say this aloud. The God took many forms. He had even burned Tollan

wearing the shape of Yaotl, the female aspect of the demon who put the ruler's children to the stone and left the stinking corpse of a giant in the city, causing all who attempted to move it to perish. That Tezcatlipoca should more recently appear as the revenant of the ruler he had destroyed required no great stretch of imagination. It was, if anything, typical of the Fate God's sense of humour.

'This is how I see it, Atonal...'

Silent, the old man awaited the verdict without any obvious display of optimism.

'Either you have foolishly struck a deal with forces as far beyond our understanding as they are beyond the scope of negotiation, in which case there is little to be done,' - Momacani braced himself in readiness for the wrath which his words were sure to inspire - '*or* you are an old man who drank more than five cups of octli and, thus inebriated, now have this tale of a dark man in a dark cave who told you that which you wished to hear.'

He stood resigned to the fury about to blossom upon the face of his client.

'This is the work for which Xocoyotzin pays you?' Atonal spluttered, his mouth suddenly inadequate for his great wealth of objections. 'You are stepping upon my teeth and my hair!'

'I have told you only those words which no other has had the courage to deliver. Whether you speak with lips of wood or whether it is chaff and straw, no man can help you. Your time would be best spent making sacrifice towards a more fortunate outcome than that which you anticipate,' - he paused in thought - 'also, you should perhaps stay off the drink for a while.'

Momacani stepped out into the street. Angered cursing rose up in his wake as the elder came out to deliver a parting shot. 'In truth I expected no better of the *Mexitin*,' - the name was spat with venomous emphasis. 'Your kind deliver only ruin, just as that racoon you have seen fit to set upon your throne will ruin this world for all of us!'

Knowing full well he should rise above the inference, Momacani nevertheless turned. 'The New Fire Ceremony will proceed as it has always done, despite what chattering coral snakes may say; and by your own inebriate testimony you will join Lord Huemac in the afterlife two days prior to the end of our world, so at least take comfort from that.'

'The Mexitin were ever a race of dogs. Tezozomoc had the right idea

about you people. The first of your line was but a monstrous twin of the one your grandfathers chose for their Tlatoani. It is no surprise that you should all have turned out as you did!'

Momacani would not be drawn further - the fellow was now pulling racial slurs from out of his fundament for the sheer pleasure of it. He walked away, continuing to the end of the street as the insults withered upon the vine. This visit had been, as anticipated, a waste of time.

The sky had dimmed somewhat, evening drawing too close to allow for a return to Tenochtitlan. The journey would be intercepted by night, and night belonged to the less amiable elements of the sacred realm.

He retraced his steps back through the market as traders brought their businesses to a close, then continued on into the eastern quarter and another street of low adobe houses. At the first corner he came to a large stone building taking up at least three times the ground space of adjacent dwellings. A skirt of conch designs painted along the foot of the stucco walls marked it as an embassy of the Pochteca Guild. He found the entrance and went in. A guard barred his path, a tall Xochimilcan wearing quilted armour and a cloak woven with flower designs.

Momacani reached into his pouch and took out a polished cross section of conch shell, like a flattened star with a spiral of gold inlay curving around the inside. He showed it to the guard eliciting a cursory nod of acceptance and was allowed to pass. The embassy was built around a square courtyard, open to the sky and framed by a covered walkway.

Groups of men sat around in huddles of hushed conversation, some perched upon the rim of a central pool as they soaked aching feet in the shallow waters. The carrying frames and cloaks of traders were leant against walls and columns or hung from rafters of the cloisters. These were the Pochteca, traders who crossed great distances, often breaching enemy territory in search of precious objects; some might even be Oztomeca, the more clandestine subset of the guild who gathered intelligence in foreign cities.

Along the walkway were entrances to numerous single room dwellings. Momacani found one that was empty, that had not been marked out by the belongings of other visitors, and went in. He set his pouch to the floor and removed his cloak as an attendant entered with a torch. The man set flames to the hearth fire at the centre of the room, waiting a moment to ensure that the kindling had lit, then left. Momacani settled himself upon the reed mat at one side and waited.

Another moment passed and two young women came in with bowls of food. Neither looked at their guest, and both wore their hair long in the fashion of those still to be wed. They set their wares before the hearth - a flat stone supported by three others with the fire burning beneath - then both sat, carefully smoothing out their white cotton rebozos and skirts. One began toasting corn and a few chillis, turning them within the flame upon hardwood skewers. The other meanwhile flattened a ball of maize dough, tossing it from one palm to the other as it softened to tortilla shape.

Momacani found himself distracted, looking around, driven by the strangest sensation that there could be another person in the room besides the three of them.

One of the women noticed his puzzlement. 'Something troubles you, I would say.'

He shook his head, clearing thoughts as they gathered like dust. 'I think I must be very tired.'

'You will be better once you have eaten, and then you can sleep.'

The woman with the dough patted her first tortilla into a floppy circle and slapped it onto the warming hearth stone before starting on a second. She kneaded away and her eyes briefly moved across Momacani with casual interest. Her gaze held, then an instant of wild disbelief before she resumed her work.

The Ixtilli stifled a yawn. 'Daughter, is there something wrong?'

The woman shook her head, but would not raise her eyes. 'Nothing is amiss, Lord, only that it is dark in here and my sight is yet unaccustomed.' Her words had the tone of one who would not be drawn to point out the obvious for fear of giving offence. Her hands picked up speed, busily slapping the tortilla from one palm to the other.

Momacani turned his head, wondering what she had seen, cautious of any scorpion that might be making its way across the wall towards him. He saw only himself, his belongings, and his own shadow dancing in the soft flicker of the hearth fire. He regarded the flames, then again his own dark silhouette cast upon the wall at his side; and then he wondered by what trick of light it had moved out from its proper place.

2.5

Vicereine Iseult addresses him by his full title, Ordnance-Decurion Goralschaixianthellipse. This is interesting being as it is hardly required by

the protocols of so informal a hearing and seems to represent a shift in the dynamic. In itself, this is perhaps not surprising given all which has been achieved by his Blood Command. She is wary and exercises caution, as well she should.

The mood amongst the archons of House Xianthellipse at last seems to be running in his favour, accolades bestowed in recognition of services rendered rather than because it would be embarrassing to let his crusade continue without acknowledgement.

He stands before the podium as usual, but today he does not feel his to be the minor position. If anything, it seems more as though the archons have taken cover behind their own authority, fearful of provoking him to wrath.

Vicereine Iseult begins with an account of the Ganda Mnemma campaign, expenditure, losses, projected strategic advantages and so on. This she follows with the aesculapia for Godfather Shuck, presently detained in the House nosocomion having his timeline stitched back, not that it will make much difference. Academician Rhenaveer reads a catalogue of biological and temporal indignities performed upon the person of the Godfather. It is unclear whether he is impressed, or provides the list as an indictment.

Goralschai knows he did that which was necessary under the circumstances, and has no interest in the ethics of the situation.

Of course, they begin to discuss the memecore and its recovery.

He has nothing to tell them in regard to this aspect of the campaign. They were not present, and it really is *that simple.*

Vicereine Iseult is concerned about the continuity, so concerned that she is able to overcome her apparent fear of dealing with the author of deeds listed in Rhenaveer's catalogue. She insists that future actions will be determined pending the full identification of those terminated, and that classification is therefore essential. Goralschai had no knowledge of whether Shuck's second was indeed one of the four, some high-ranking Godfather. He has no interest in such details, and nor does he have any time so idle as to afford the luxury of such interest. He would tell her that this map is not representative of its territory but for the certain knowledge that her interest is still further removed. He sees her arranging factors of combatants in order, taking delight in complete sets. He would tell her that the nature of the battlefield allows for discontinuity were it not pointing out the screamingly obvious.

He listens to the charges with little interest. This is something like a political game by which they amuse themselves here on the Homeworld at such distance from the front. It allows them to experience some sense of involvement, and he understands that.

The two of them talk amongst themselves for a short time, discussing options.

They wish to know him, to appreciate the perspective of one capable of such acts. As soon as the desire is expressed, it becomes clear that they will never understand him any more than the Drudge which cleans the shit off his boots gains a perspective into prochronic warfare.

He agrees to the debriefing with no intention of attendance, having work to do in preparation for his return to Ganda Mnemma.

As he leaves, an Ecclesiast brings news from the nosocomion, that they have been forced to cauterise Godfather Shuck's entire chronology leaving what little is left beached in an eternal present, so obviously he *won't be much use as a source of further intelligence.*

Goralschai thinks to ask what difference this is likely to make, but says nothing.

3.1 (east)

Another clutch of bedraggled passengers came onto the coach, shuffling along the aisle towards the unoccupied seats. Murmuring and muttering amongst themselves, their voices settled to a drone against the grumble of the engine and a tinny radio tuned to a ranchera station. Cheek and brow pressed to the window, Primo gazed at puddles of rainwater by the road side. Río Frío de Juárez did not seem like much of a town, a forgotten gobbet of city snagged on this lonely stretch of highway up here in the mountains and fog. Unless you were born here, it was a place you would only ever pass through on the way to somewhere more interesting.

He drew back to inspect himself in the glass: dark glossy hair, sad narrow eyes, rumours of a thistledown moustache - those mestizo genes still battling the smooth-lipped Nahua side of the family. He was tired and looked it, but with his best pale cream guayabera and freshly ironed jeans, at least he had dressed nice. Ultima might be crazy, but he still wanted to make a good impression. It felt like he had been glued into this seat. Perhaps there was something in the traditional notion of each thing having an *ixihtec*, an intangible essence prescribing its qualities. Perhaps he had spent so many hours in that chair in the hotel lobby that he had become imprinted with some fat-assed ixihtec of inertia and was slowly turning into a solid object. Another year and they would be able to stand him in the fountain next to Chalchihuitlicue.

Air rasped between front teeth. Primo's eyes met those of an old woman scowling from beneath a broad-brimmed hat. She clutched at her fading rebozo as though anticipating robbery and shifted herself into the seat behind, steam engine breath labouring beyond ordinary asthma.

A hydraulic hiss scored the closing of the door up front, and they were off. Primo set his face against the window to look out. Drenched figures swept back and forth along broken paving buying cheap clothes, tinned food, and muddy vegetables from open-fronted stores. The wheezing from the seat behind settled to a steady rhythm as the woman struck up halting conversation with another passenger. The air was too thin and too wet up here amongst the clouds, she explained, and her lungs would benefit from a lower, dryer altitude; but she had lived in Río Frío all her life, and Our Lady had once appeared to her cousin in the hills at the back of the town. Her hope was that she too might one day receive the blessing of divine

grace.

Primo attuned his ears to the insect buzz of music, hoping to drive the conversation into the background as he stared out at rolling fields, the distant wall of conifers and the mountain slopes beyond. Shiny automobiles flashed by in a hiss of spray, Japanese and American models taking business people to close deals and verify quotas in Puebla. These were the children of wealthy ghettos like those out towards Toluca, their lives spent hopping between islands of razor wire and closed circuit TV. They lived in a different country.

'Chocolates! Chicles! Refrescos! Only ten pesos!'

He woke with a start. Time had passed. A middle-aged man in a purple shirt waddled along the aisle, seeking a response to his sing-song mantra. The woman in the seat behind was gabbling away like a happy turkey as other passengers crowded around and crossed themselves. The coach had become a circus, prattling voices but no engine noise. Shaking his head, Primo looked to the world beyond the window and realisation dawned. He leapt from the seat, snatched his bag down from the overhead compartment and squeezed past the gum seller.

'Wait! I need to get out!'

Primo bundled down the steps onto the pavement, then staggered back from the coach trying to disentangle his bearings from the hoot and growl of traffic. The snow cloaked peak of Popocateptl dominated the horizon even at this great distance, a mountain made of sky looming above the town in the absence of a guiding star. Thus orientated, Primo set off down a street of low stucco buildings, bright colours aglow beneath a spider web of telegraph wire. The heat of the day was rising and it was slow progress, stepping from the pavement to avoid people spilling out of doorways; dodging back each time a pickup rumbled past; halting at the corner as a sun-dried tradesman creaked by with a barrow of water bottles for office coolers.

Through the town square and on he trudged, passing the old Cholula pyramid surmounted by its icing sugar church. He could never remember if this was some deliberate colonisation of the past, or if the pyramid had been so overgrown that the Christians had mistaken it for a hill and built up there without realising.

After nearly an hour of smaller, hotter streets depopulated by the midday sun, he came to the house, just one storey at the end of a block, lime green stucco and a roof of red tiles with open countryside beyond. He

stepped up to the door and made to knock just as it was opened by his grandmother. Ultima appeared smaller and wider than when he last saw her, but that could have been his memory playing tricks - it had been at least a year. Her face was formed entirely from lines, a wide downward curve for a mouth, twinkling slivers of darkness for eyes, all lashed together with a web of furrows and wrinkles.

'Primo. I am very pleased to see you.' She somehow managed to make it sound like a threat, but nevertheless stepped aside and bid him enter, one hand clasping at her rebozo.

'Doña Ultima. I am very glad to be here.' He smiled and kissed her soft leather cheek.

She grunted and shooed him inside so that she could close the door. 'You know where everything is. I want you to make yourself at home, within reason.'

He went through to the kitchen at the back of the house. The room was dark with clutter, pots and pans hanging everywhere, jars of maize and herbs, an old wood burning stove to one side and a large table at the centre. The rear wall was open, shutters folded back on either side to afford a view of the garden and the distant mountain. An ornate ironwork table was set outside beneath the awning, two chairs waiting.

Primo set down his bag, noticing a rough stone idol seated to one side of the step overlooking the yard. The figure was of a kneeling woman in native dress, just over knee height and still with faint tracks of red and blue paint running across its pitted surface. This was something new.

'It seems such a long time since I saw you last, Doña Ultima.'

'That's because it *is* such a long time.' She set a pan of water to boil on the stove and fetched a red enamel coffee pot from a cupboard.

'I thought I would—'

'I know why you are here, child. I will do what I can to help you.'

Primo smiled without quite knowing why. The Mexican grandmother was a formidable creature, more like a feature of the land than of the people who lived upon it. The rest of the world should probably think itself lucky that the government was yet to discover the military potential of Mexico's rural matriarchy.

His eyes returned to the stone idol. 'Do you know who it is?'

'You tell me, college boy. You're the expert.'

He felt blood sweep hot to his face. His mouth fell open but no words emerged.

Ultima batted a hand and began to gather mugs together. 'Relax. I'm pulling your ears. It is Our Lady Chantico. I found her as I was digging my garden.'

Primo went down for a closer look at the figure, reading the glyphs raised upon its shoulders. The stone was basalt and had not aged well, but the dog symbol and its compliment of nine small dots were unmistakable, Chiconahui Izcuintli or *Nine Dog*. A little below this day-sign a crudely carved flower was set within a cartouche. 'Chantico was a Goddess of Xochimilco, and I see the name of that town is also here. I wonder how she found her way to Cholula.'

'Maybe she caught an Estrella Roja coach just like you.' Ultima shrugged. Despite her best efforts, she was finding it increasingly hard to conceal the pleasure of having her grandson visit. 'You should sit down. I have a great many cakes for you and you would be wise to make a start.'

He did as he was told, stepping outside and taking one of the chairs. 'Chantico was the Goddess of the hearth, and also volcanic fire. You are lucky to have found that, Doña Ultima.'

'Well, you put a spade to soil around here and chances are you'll find something old, but yes, it was certainly lucky, even though I know you do not believe in such things.'

She brought out a mug of coffee and a plate of pastries, then creaked back into the kitchen, returning a moment later to sit with a bottle of Dos Equis. She fumbled in the pocket of her apron for an ivory handle bottle opener, popped the cap and took a swig. Primo took a bite from a sweet, sticky pastry and gazed out across the fields, long, thin strips of land divided as they had been since before the conquest. 'My mother is well. She sends her best regards.'

'I know. I speak to her on that telephone every other evening.' Ultima set down her beer and looked at him. 'Primo, what I am about to tell you may shock you.'

He regarded her with momentary unease. 'Okay.'

'You don't know everything.'

He readied himself for yet another random swerve in the conversation. 'Doña Ultima—'

'You think the old ways are crazy, and yet here you are with your head

full of the Mexico that was. If you open your eyes you will see how the Mexico that once was never went away.'

'Sure.' Primo did his best to sound like he meant it. He didn't want an argument.

'The world is made of symbols. The things we see do not matter so much. It is what they mean that counts. If you can accept that, then you will understand as I do.'

'I am sure that is true.'

'You are very diplomatic.' She laughed and took another pull on her beer. 'Anyway, regardless of whether you believe me, I will help you.'

He took a sip of coffee and stared at the mesquite tree marking the boundary between his grandmother's garden and the fields beyond, wondering whether she really knew the reason for his visit, or if this was curandera talk - knowledge implied without actually saying anything. She would already know most of it from his mother, although one thing set her apart from most other healers: the suggestion that she couldn't care less whether or not you believed her.

Ultima yielded a modest yet unrepentant belch and gazed out across the land. 'I am sorry to say that a brujera has taken an unhealthy interest in you, although I do not yet know why.'

'Right.'

'She is called *Yaotl*. She is one of many foreigners presently at large in the underworld. I do not know if she did *that* to you,' - the old woman directed an eye towards the seat of his pants - 'but I am quite sure that she has chosen to involve herself in some way.'

'Doña Ultima, forgive me, but how is it that you can know this?'

She shrugged. 'When we dream, we travel to Tlalocan. I have seen you there, although I doubt you would remember.'

Primo gazed at the mesquite tree and the land beyond. Something rustled amongst the leaves, a dark, still shape he had taken for a clot of mistletoe shifting its weight. As his eyes resolved patterns from the shade, he saw the small, round face of a screech owl.

3.2 (north)

Todd rammed the spade into the earth, tugging on its handle to dislodge another clump of soil. He leant down to get a grip on the dead stem, then

wrenched the whole tomato plant out from its tangle of undergrowth. A creak of screen door caught his ear as his mother came out to the yard. She still had slippers on her feet and a rebozo held tightly over her head. She did not look happy.

'Mom, go back inside. Rest up some.'

She ignored the plea. 'I don't want you to do this on your day off. I know you work hard, and your father will tend to the garden come the weekend. You need to go see your wife.'

Todd picked a trowel, held up the root ball and began to batter the hardened soil with just a little more force than necessary, jabbing at the clump of earth like it was the source of all his woes. He hadn't told his mother that he'd called Johnson to say he was taking time out, nor that he had visited Selena and she hadn't recognised him. The truth would be easier if he had some idea of where to look, and white lies - or washcloth grey lies in this case - were better than facing up to the possibility that he was losing his mind. He had to keep it together.

'I do not know what happened this year.' His mother stood to one side, scowling at the stems and leaves as rotting brown fruit dropped to the ground. 'Always we have fine tomatoes here.'

'I know.' Todd threw the desiccated root ball over by the compost.

'You need to call Selena. I am worried about you.'

'I know.' Putting his own troubles before those of his mother, he felt profoundly ashamed, regardless of how justified his silence might be. It wasn't like he could just go ahead and tell her everything like it was on the level of a rough day at work, but it still felt wrong. He took up the spade and jabbed it into the next patch of earth. 'Go inside, Mom. It ain't right for you to be out here. You need to rest up and get well.'

'It is worse this morning.' She shivered and drew her rebozo a little tighter around herself. 'I will visit with your grandmother. She will know what to do.'

You need to see a doctor. Running off to Mexico to stab a chicken ain't gonna make you better. That's why they invented penicillin, so as we don't have to do that shit no more.'

María looked to the heavens and crossed herself, a silent prayer written on her face with such clarity as to require no statement -*forgive the child for his terrible language and disrespect. He does not know what he is saying.*

Once again, Todd reminded himself that he had to keep it together. 'Anyway, you know how you get when you're away, and we're talking darkest Mexico here, not some taco stand just across the other side of the border. That place has changed some since you were a kid.'

'I do not mind travelling. I used to it enjoy it very much. If I did not like it, I would not be living here in the States and you would never have been born.' She shuffled away, rebozo held so tight she could have been in mourning.

A few years earlier, the whole family had taken a vacation down around Port Aransas and Padre Island. It was the first time they had been able to afford such an extravagance, and it seemed like a good way to celebrate Todd's graduation. For the most part it was okay, although María's homesickness had taken a turn for the scary when they ended up stuck on the beach at Padre Island. The place was a nature reserve - as they discovered once the guy with the truck showed up to tow their car out of the sand - but it felt like the end of the world: mile upon mile of empty dunes and random trash carried ashore by surf, thick grey clouds, and air so hot you could hardly breath. Todd's dad made some crack about how they had taken a wrong turn and ended up on Venus. His mother said it put her in mind of the Aztec afterlife, but you could tell *she* wasn't joking as she gazed across the water like she was waiting on the yellow dog to come up from the waves and take them off to the land of the dead. The subject of vacations had not been raised since. Roads out of San Antonio led to the Realm of the Fleshless so far as María was concerned.

Todd looked down at the spade. He'd lost all enthusiasm for the task. The hard physical labour of digging out the plant hadn't really helped any. If anything it only set him to thinking all the more about alternative universe Selena. Last night, before he'd gone to bed with the thought of calling Johnson and spinning out a line about back trouble, he'd dug out that old copy of *San Antonio Express News* to look at the classified congratulations for which his dad had paid, himself and Selena on their wedding day at the Bexar County Court House : black and white picture of Selena and this Nathan Jordan on the happiest day of their lives; adding insult to injury there had been a minor item on page five, some farmer from Pearsall had won an award for his honey, a guy named Peter Calavero same as Todd's dad, same age too, although thankfully there was no picture. He was for the present spared the reality in which his own father had never married María de la Vega Lunas.

He had to get out, he decided. This was too much right now.

Ten minutes later he was again at the wheel, just driving around without any real destination. Waiting at the lights on North New Braunfels, he sat gazing at the tape deck. No-one had a tape deck in their ride except him. It was one of those things. Electronics failed in his presence, at least anything made since he'd been alive, CD players, cellphones, wristwatch, ATM machine, computers were *right out*: he was so accustomed to this as a bland fact of life that he barely even thought of it; it was strange, but he was used to it. Whatever this new thing turned out to be, he would get used to that too. He just had to keep it together.

The light changed and he realised he was now driving over to Justin's place, thinking maybe the guy would be feeling better this morning. Possibly he'd already left for work. Todd wasn't even sure why he had just now decided to visit with his friend, but it seemed like something he should do. It could be concern, or could be he was shoring up all the normal pieces of the world in the hope that the bad dream elements would get the message and fall into line.

He pulled up outside Justin's place - no sign of the guy's ride, but of course there wouldn't be. So far so good. He got out and strolled up the drive, weaving around a sagging outcrop of cardboard boxes full of old magazines and junk, then behind Maricela's Ford Taurus to the side door. He pressed the bell and waited as the chime spelled out the opening bars of *La Bamba*. The door swung open, then the frame of mosquito netting. Maricela leaned out - pink hoop earrings with matching hair slide, a little too much make up, and an old halter top with a cartoon dog on the front - all nice and familiar. 'Hey there.'

'I guess Justin went to work after all, huh?'

She paused, mental arithmetic. 'Yes he did.'

Her face stalled, waiting for him to speak. He rejected anything he might ordinarily have said, anything which might lead to *and who the hell are you?* The illusion was holding and he wasn't going to let it fall apart just yet.

Okay, just tell him I called. Nope - that left the window wide open for *sure, but what did you say your name was?* He shrugged and began to walk away before anything could get awkward. 'It ain't important. I'll check for him later.'

Another ten minutes and he was in Jim's off Broadway eating chicken fried steak having reasoned that chicken fried steak usually made things better. *Who the hell am I kidding,* he told himself, *she didn't know me from*

Adam. Even the damn mailman had asked whether he was back with Selena, and it was a sure thing that Maricela would have been fit to burst with advice if she'd known who she was talking to.

Todd ate his steak and drank his sweet tea and then got back out on the road, heading up towards McAllister, still chasing that dream of thoughts all running along in straight lines, hurrying to their places and making sense.

McAllister Park was a stretch of wilderness, mile upon mile of oak, cedar, and mesquite well within the city limits. Todd left his car in the lot and wandered off into the trees, looking to get himself lost a spell. It had rained two nights back, so the creeks were full once again, and he suddenly knew *exactly* why he'd come here. Even the noise of city traffic was silenced. This was no longer the same world - flakes of sunlight shining through the trees, their boughs knotted with tangles of ball moss, and slow, green waters snaking along through it all. This was a place in which you could step to one side and take stock. He knew this place from childhood, and it seemed like no time had passed. High school, Selena, growing up, getting a ride and hosing down old furniture - all these things were yet to happen. They were not quite real.

He walked a little then seated himself on a log at the edge of the creek, disturbing a swarm of tiny black frogs, sending them back to the water like a shower of dark raindrops. This was the sort of thing his mother would appreciate - that *listening to the planet* Indian stuff, getting in touch with his native roots, that *old country* shit. So many people were ignorant to his background that he sometimes forgot it himself.

Folk from his mother's side of the family, at least those he'd met, they knew a different side of life. Mexico was what happened when you made Aztecs go to church, hoping a guy nailed to a cross would take their minds off human sacrifice. They had their ghosts and spirits and fate, and all those beliefs that he'd never been quite brave enough to call crazy. It wasn't even that his mother bought into that stuff like she had a choice - that was just how her world turned. That vacation down in Corpus Christi, when they ended up stuck on the beach - for both Todd and his father, that place felt like another planet. For his mother, it was the underworld.

Her ancestors had no concept of Hell until the Spanish brought it across the Atlantic with their guns, money, and written words. Her ancestors instead had Mictlan, which was cold and damp, grey and stifling, and a lot like the beach out at Padre Island - except of course for the heat, although that had not personally bothered him so much. He'd never really considered

this before, but for her, that underworld was *real*, as real as Houston or Austin or New Braunfels. She'd stood upon the sand babbling about the dog that took souls across the river - although at the time he somehow thought she meant Face whom they had left with Justin. No wonder she'd been freaked out by that vacation. That beach was her Land of the Dead.

What sort of fool calls a dog Scarface? That is a terrible name for a dog.

Todd laughed to himself as his mother's words rolled back on a train of derailed thought. She was right. Scarface really *was* a terrible name for a dog, but he hated those damn stupid names folks always gave Chihuahuas - Pepe, Chichi, Sir Barksalot and so on.

He sighed, and stared into the depths of the creek. The water seemed different, glassy and unmoving, speckled with small dark flakes he had taken to be pollen but which turned out to be the tiny bodies of the frogs seen earlier. He reached out to touch the surface and felt ice, hard against his fingertips.

3.3 (west)

'There we go. Sweet as a nut.' Rhodenet didn't look up, and it was quite clear that he'd made the statement largely for his own benefit, confirmation of work completed, and completed with flair. He appreciated how it sounded, how the phrase felt upon his lips. Emiousha had watched the arch of his back as he toiled at the pebbles and now wondered, not for the first time, what peculiar twists of voidwork were wrought within his biodata.

The Ordnance-Tetrarch had, according to the record, contributed greatly to the seeding of their chapterhouse, to the uniquely speculative blend of causal oddities woven into their bloodline in the hope of bringing forth something interesting and deadly. Only an addlepate would presume to understand the motive or intent of his kind.

Rhodenet sat back upon his haunches, smoothing the creases of his pressure suit and perspiring a little from the extended act of concentration. Arranged before him in the gloom of the hogan, pebbles danced across the ground in ornate swirls, each carrying a tiny archemathic character encrypted in dry blood; handwritten codes, the individual notes of a great symphony which, completed, would tap directly into foundation logarithms detected beyond the Netherweald, on the far side of the flaw; but for now they were only numbers, a pattern upon the shingle resembling some improbably baroque fossil.

It seemed fitting, like this ground was somehow made for life, as though all of the letters were present but the environment had not yet found sufficient reason to form words. The Netherweald didn't even have a geosphere in the conventional sense, let alone anything resembling a noösphere. Pyrhentana had a theory that it supported a crudely biological field, but her remora had regressed to some sort of rudimentary sound recording device utilising spools of magnetic tape before she could run the relevant tests. Now all they had to go on were hunches, hallucinations, and that feeling of being watched - the science of primitives and inferior species.

'You really should find something to do with yourself, Emiousha.' Rhodenet shook his head, unable to keep a trace of amusement from his voice. 'I doubt my behind bobbing up and down can really be *that* fascinating.'

He had a point. She'd spent a lot of time out here these last few housedays, mute witness to his labours and not once presuming to engage him in conversation. Simply it was less depressing than the alternative.

Out here there were options, albeit options contingent to an unrealistic degree of optimism. The couloirs of the chapterhouse now had a taint of the sepulchral. They all led to the same dark place, to a dead end. Insoleanis and Arven were in the final stages of the blight, and Nuris had been committed. Rhodenet was the one male childe as yet unaffected. Here in the cold and wet of the Netherweald, scratching away at his miserable little stones in some vain hope of survival, his will to live blazed like a new star in such a small and dismal universe.

She watched him cleaning his brush in a carafe of water, flaking dried blood from the bristles between finger and thumb, and wondered if he would complete the work in time; even whether any of it really mattered. House Meddhoran's male lineage had just this one childe remaining, and there was something wrong with Laethynrisa. The blight had crossed over, gone gynotropic.

The Kithriarch took a sobering breath of frosty Netherweald air, and recalled her obligations, or at least accepted them as a general concept. She could do no good out here, hovering over the last male childe as though driven by some peculiarly atavistic quirk of biology. Equally it was unlikely she could do much good shuffling around in the chapterhouse, but quality of action was hardly the point. That was where she belonged.

Rhodenet stood, limbs cramping from so long spent huddled upon the

stones. He had for the moment returned his needles and brushes to their box.

Emiousha looked over his work. 'You are finished here?'

'Not as yet.' He patted the fabric of the pressure suit where it was strapped tight across his abdomen. 'I've been asomniac for the duration. The job gets done but it's tough on the hæmocyanins. I need to ingest protein, you know what I'm saying?'

She did, but not why he should have enquired as to her comprehension, and she found herself irritated for no obvious reason. *I should be elsewhere, setting an example to my consociates*, she thought, *at least to those still drawing breath,* not *tagging along out here like some low grade functionary*. Adjusting the blinkers, fixing them back against her temples, she rose from crouching to smooth her peignoir back to its natural shape.

Outside in the Netherweald, the grey overhead lay still as ever, pregnant with carnivorous intent. Emiousha could not think of it as *sky*; sky gave no cause to believe that it could be watching you, *or* that it regarded you as prey.

She examined the familiar bulk of the Drudge. The clay man stood inert beside the hogan, a silent statue awaiting her decree, a point of obedience in the wilderness. It had been an indulgence to bring a servitor as escort but she found its presence reassuring.

Her gaze settled upon the silhouette of the chapterhouse as illusions clawed blindly at the edge of her senses. There was no life here, or at least nothing that had shown up when House Meddhoran first appeared. The apparitions, the sense of terror was psychological, possibly an interference pattern, some property of the Netherweald modulating against the function of nascent childe minds; but knowing these wraiths to be imaginary brought sadly little comfort.

The chapterhouse moved, swaying one side to the other.

The resulting gusher of fear waned as Emiousha saw that House Meddhoran was fine, *and* a little to the left of where she had been looking. This was the motion of someone approaching. She squinted, but could make out no detail. The shape in the mist was beyond identification. It drew near, bare feet crunching upon pebbles louder with each step, a figure dressed only in a short dhoti of an unfamiliar cut, white with a dark trim. He was male and almost naked, jet black hair and a brow deformed beneath a weight of bone, a face made for dark thoughts.

The fear came back, forcing sound from her lips.

Rhodenet was stood at her side speaking, his words illegible.

The figure approached, the bronze hue of its flesh glowing through the freezing fog. It eclipsed the chapterhouse. It seemed immense, a looming monstrosity at three times the height of an ordinary male, perhaps twice that of a Drudge.

'It's from this place, from the Netherweald. It—'

Rhodenet lay unconscious, sprawled upon the shale where he had fallen, his words truncated.

The next few moments of Emiousha's life were a blur, jagged images bobbing around upon a tumultuous swell of adrenaline, a mad dash back to the chapterhouse as she spurred the Drudge to greater haste than its heavy physique would allow. Rhodenet, the blight, the wraiths, the Towering Man all log-jammed in a bottleneck of raw fear.

Her feet pounded the steps, hammering at the wood.

There was nothing in pursuit, but she could not stop, breath rasping.

This one had maintained a physical presence, nothing like the illusory ghosts to which the childrene were unavoidably accustomed. This was something new. The Netherweald was turning inwards, rooting them out with something more tangible than wraiths.

'This is different to that which affected the others.'

Someone spoke, addressing her directly; grey eyes and short dark hair - Thraenrellis.

They were in the nosocomion again. The Drudge had set Rhodenet down upon an empty catafalque. Laethynrisa occupied the next in line, red shadows below her eyes, dirty straw hair stuck to her forehead with sweat. She looked awful, but crucially she was entirely conscious.

'What happened?'

'There was a figure, a Towering Man, something from the Netherweald,' - Emiousha struggled to order her thoughts - 'I do not know. Rhodenet collapsed.'

'I would not say this is the blight.' Thraenrellis stood over the male, holding his wrist in a particular way whilst touching certain points upon his forehead. Deprived of the use of her remora, she had spent some time in the athenæum researching archaic aesculapian practice by which distant ancestors performed their curatives. 'His temperature and pulse are standard. Rather it seems that something has taken his consciousness.'

'Something has taken his consciousness...' Emiousha absently echoed the statement as though it would yield sense through this simple act of repetition.

'That is not all that has been stolen.' Ecclesiast Thraenrellis crimped her brow, first examining Rhodenet's fingernails then a studied glance at the hair upon his head. 'His keratinous growth has somehow receded. He is now younger than he was a moment ago.'

The Kithriarch recalled that Thraenrellis had recently been catechised for eidetic memory and was entirely capable of recognising such minor physiological changes. If some of Rhodenet's continuity was missing, it might still be possible to run a cross check with his biologue and work out just how much - providing those volumes Dorhira had found really *were* biologues in regressed form.

Something moved at the corner of her eye, a suggestion of darkness slipped out from beneath the body on the catafalque. There was motion, slow and measured, reptilian, an understanding of something about to strike. Rhodenet's shadow expanded by its own volition, increasing across the chamber in open defiance of the gloomy light shed by an illuminant set into the entablature. Emiousha and Thraenrellis shared a stark hit of fear as the shockwave of unrefined information tore free from its host, slamming them to the floor. The penumbra condensed to a basic humanoform painted upon the far wall, something squat bristling with curious hostility. It appeared to be searching, looking around.

'I told you!' Thraenrellis picked herself up and began scrabbling in a coffer at the side of Rhodenet's catafalque for something she might use as a weapon. 'Didn't I tell you!?'

The shadow elongated suddenly like a late evening, slipping into the gap between the wood of the egress and the jamb of its frame, and was gone.

Thraenrellis now had an amaranth in one hand. She leapt over Rhodenet's catafalque with astonishing, improbable grace and flew across the chamber in pursuit, almost yanking the egress from its armature. Fleeing the nosocomion, her voice echoed back from the landing, underscored with the drone of the amaranth, amplified as the sound returned from all those tiers above and below. 'It's going upwards, heading for the air gallery!'

Emiousha regarded the Drudge as though she owed it an explanation, then ran after her consociate, knowing the hunt to be futile, but lacking any

other option. The Ecclesiast's progress boomed up and down the vertical distance of the escalier, House Meddhoran's vertebrae, hard fibrous soles slamming wooden steps over and over, chasing after a shadow.

3.4 (south)

His shadow had been in the wrong place. Momacani was quite certain of this although it was the end of a long day and he was tired, and his eyes were perhaps as much in need of rest as his limbs. Chewing upon toasted corn and chillis, he gazed into the flames of the hearth fire.

Ocotochtli had once suggested that he was not properly bound to the world, and perhaps this was still true of his shadow. *You are mixtitlan, ayauhtitlan,* the old priest told him, *you are out of the clouds, out of the mist,* although this pronouncement did little to dispel the mystery.

'You are a story that has been read by many but is still only a story. You are a character in a painted book which thought itself a man.' Ocotochtli grinned through his mask of red and black paint, the smile of one who did not care whether or not he made himself understood. 'All that you recall, and all that your mother and father recall has detail, but only the detail of a tale that one friend tells to another. Today we shall set this to right.'

They had climbed Huixachtepetl under a scorching sun. The leisurely pace of work on his father's garden had not left Momacani well prepared for this pilgrimage, but he had been told that a theological undertaking made without an element of struggle would probably not count for much. The old priest grunted, suffering with the weight of the bundle upon his back and the heat of noon - punishing at this time of day even for an ordinary man; but Ocotochtli was older than fifty-two years, and his calling demanded absolute abstinence from cleanliness. That was the lot of the clergy: dealing with sacred forces required one to move at the very limit of the ordinary world, to align oneself with the extraordinary, the freakish, even the disgusting. His hair was wild and matted into thick greasy ropes, and his body was, as ever, smothered head to foot in the soot, sap, and grime of his office. The acrid stink was overwhelming even at a distance, and Momacani felt particularly glad that admittance into the Ixtilque did not require quite the same degree of piety attained by his patron.

'You fully understand what we are to do today, why we have come to this place?'

Momacani nodded, understanding only that this was required of him as

an Ixtilli.

The priest scowled. 'You are a man of puzzling heritage, one who has come unstuck. Today we shall change this by dedicating you to the world, and in this way secure your ambiguous history against incursions of the sacred.'

Again the youth nodded, an acknowledgement that he had heard if not understood.

Ocotochtli unwrapped his bundle. 'It is required that you disrobe.'

Momacani loosened his loincloth, unwinding the length of cotton from around and between his legs, then took up position - feet apart and arms spread. Ocotochtli selected a brush and began the work of painting his subject, starting at an ankle and working up. Time passed in silence until at last the youth was coated head to foot with a thick sweet-smelling pigment of deep sky blue. The priest painted a black racoon mask around his student's obediently closed eyes, embellishing it with a border of white spots. 'This shows that your grandfathers were of the Chichimec race, and these marks are the stars of the northern sky.'

Momacani spoke through clenched teeth. 'I understood myself to be a man of the south.'

'Indeed you are, and so you are made as the living image of Huitzilopochtli, the southern warrior born with shield and sword at Coatepetl in the Chichimec land of the north.'

The old man unfolded a collection of bark paper accoutrements from his bundle and dressed his subject, a sawtooth crown and ceremonial knots around upper arms and calves. Then, as the paint was drying, he piled kindling at the edge of a shallow pool of water. 'You were born upon the day Mactlactome Malinalli - Twelve Grass. *Mactlactome Malinalli is the twelfth day of Ce Cipactli, which is as you know auspicious and fated to Lord Tezcatlipoca; this being a southern day-sign we should concern ourselves more with Tezcatlipoca in the aspect of Huitzilopochtli.'*

The priest sat hunched, energetically pumping at his bow and drill to make fire. 'Those who watch over us made you so that you may give yourself in sacrifice. This is the way of things.'

The flames caught and the wood began to crackle. Ocotochtli scuttled across to his travelling reliquary, returning with a clay bowl and a handful of thick black maguey thorns. 'You must make an offering, thirteen times each limb. Leave the spines in your flesh and gather the blood in this bowl. Do it over there.' He pointed to the far side of the pool.

Momacani took his materials and went to the spot as indicated. He sat, pressing a thorn into the calf of his left leg. Dark red beads bloomed from blue flesh, dripping into the vessel. At some length he was done and, recalling the next movement, he moved to the fire to plant his feet upon either side. As blood baked down the inside of his legs and heat scoured his flesh, he fixed his eyes to the east, towards the mountains.

Ocotochtli's voice rose to a war cry. 'Tlahuixcalpantecuhtli who bears up the eastern sky where the light emerges, where life begins at the sign of the reed, this one is your blood and your sustenance. Let your face appear within him.'

Momacani's shuffled around to face the second direction.

'Xiuhtecuhtli who bears up the northern sky from which the cold is born, where death is granted at the sign of the knife, this one is your blood and your sustenance. Let your face appear within him.'

Now in great pain, the student turned once more as the invocation continued.

'Ehecatl who bears up the western sky, Cihuatlan and the region of the holy seed ground, where women bear children in the sign of the house, this one is your blood and your sustenance. Let your face appear within him.'

The priest gestured for the fourth direction. 'Leave the fire and go to the south. Quickly now.'

Momacani's twitching muscles carried him stumbling, a dance of white hot agony around the edge of the pool to where he had pierced himself with thorns. Burns flared up his inner thighs and across hands that had cupped his shrivelled parts. Fighting the pain, he took up the bowl of blood as leg muscles roasted beneath blistered blue skin, then spoke as instructed.

'Mictlantecuhtli who bears up the southern sky above the land of thorns, where sacrifice is made at the sign of the rabbit,' - he paused to tip the bowl, hand trembling - 'I am your blood and your sustenance. Let your face appear within me.'

The old priest smiled beneath his layers of paint and grime, watching the fluid leach into the sand. 'At Coatepetl your mother was Coatlicue, and there she swallowed a piece of jade fallen from heaven.' He gave the youth a shove, pitching him forward into the pool, then extended a hand to pull him spluttering onto the bank. 'Now you are born from this earth, from the waters, my child, born with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other.'

Moments passed in silence before Momacani had settled enough to

crack a whisper. 'Over?'

'It is sealed.' Ocotochtli spoke with uncharacteristic warmth. 'You will make war with the beast of the city, and the people will be grateful, and in this way will your fame be fortified.'

A rumble of thunder broke Momacani's reverie. The earth and sand beyond the door leapt and crackled, pummelled by a punishing downpour of water from above. For all his powers of recall, he was no wiser in respect of Ocotochtli's prediction, and there was work still to be done. Night had fallen, and Mictlantecuhtli would be in residence, he reminded himself with a quick, silent request to the Death God for favour in this next undertaking.

All his scrabbling thoughts were small animals. He pictured himself catching and securing them in a wooden box, repeating the process each time some new idea broke free and made to distract him. At last, he found himself settled.

This was not necessarily a reliable technique. Empty one's mind, make of it a book without pictures - so the idea ran - and whatever forces have become entangled in one's fate will reveal themselves just as stray thoughts might emerge in a dream.

After an indeterminate time, Momacani saw himself as a wanderer in a great subterranean wilderness. He relaxed and allowed the images to cohere of their own volition. The sky was a plane of rock and soil, the underside of creation at a distance that defied an estimate. This was a cavern, a hypogean inversion of the waking world. This was Tlalocan.

This is in my imagination and is not to be considered real, Momacani thought to himself, before deciding that the two might amount to the same.

'Best you just go with the moment.' The woman had been at his side all along. She had grey hair tied at the back of her head in a plait, and her face was as dark and wrinkled as shrivelled fruit. Her clothes seemed unfamiliar, possibly those of a Totonac or Popoloca or one of the north-eastern tribes. She was hunched, peering over the lip of the rock.

'Are you my *nahualli* - my familiar?' Momacani saw only a semi-desert plain ahead of them.

'Get down. Do not let her see you.' She pressed a bony hand to his shoulder and forced him to his knees with surprising strength. 'No, I am not your nahualli, foolish boy, but you are free to consider me an ally if that makes you feel better.'

There was a woman out walking on the plain. She had short hair, worn in the custom of one yet to be wed despite her evident age. Her face and hands were deathly pale, with a complicated robe of thick, dark material covering her body and a flash of polished obsidian at the neck. There could be no mistaking the mirror of Tezcatlipoca, and here was the *female* aspect of the God - in his thoughts for the second time that day. This was Yaotl, the same malign sorceress who brought about the ruin of the Toltecs, who destroyed their city and drove Huemac to suicide. She was the God in his most dangerously capricious form.

'Do you know that person?' He kept his voice low.

The old woman cast him a disparaging glance. 'I know she does not belong, and for some reason she has *also* taken an interest in you. Personally I would not be inclined to trust her.'

'Nor I.' He watched a little longer. 'What is she doing?'

'We call it *walking* where I come from.' The elder pointed a gnarled finger. 'That way is the north and Mictlan. She has come from Cihuatlan in the west. Make of it what you will.'

His gaze drawn by a twitch of motion, Momacani looked up to the stars. They were moving, swirling, silently crawling across heaven like grubs within an immense black wound, and he knew this was some event yet to come. It had been said that the Fifth Sun - the present age of the world - would end with its stars turned to Tzitzimime, celestial demons which would descend to earth like spiders down silken threads to destroy the living.

Deciding that he had seen enough for the present, Momacani opened his eyes.

The rain poured outside his room in the building of the Pochteca Guild, although its fury was now diminished, and the hearth fire had reduced to softly glowing logs. He shook his head to clear the torpor that had followed him up from the underworld, then reached for the half cup of water still at his side and tried not to think about the forthcoming New Fire Ceremony and all that would be at stake.

3.5

Academician Rhenaveer introduces him as Ordnance-Tetrarch Gorlaschaixianthellipse and steps back from the caryatid so that the veteran may come forward. Goralschai takes up position. He feels

uncomfortable in such clothes, the ceremonial robes of office - impractical and so unlike anything worn during service as to border on parody.

Gazing across the air gallery, he takes in their faces, fifteen childrene recently loomed but already tainted with failure. It is his "privilege" to talk them out of whatever character flaws were wrought upon their breeding engine. This is not my work*, he thinks to himself.*

Somehow he failed to anticipate the Newblood initiative and this bothers him. Clearly the enterprise has value, but this obsession with variation as an end in itself seems perverse, these childrene being a case in point. Their breeding engine was seeded with lesser species cultural material in hope of unexpected results proving useful to the war effort. Goralschai is unable to follow the logic here. House Meddhoran, it seems to him, is engendered to produce hybrids.

He delivers words that have been edited and approved by Biblarian Urizen: key events of his military career - the Spike, the Llammas IV campaign, the rout of the Raithaduine cultists. At length he concludes. His mouth is dry, and whilst his text contains nothing he would call an untruth, neither does it speak of his experience in the field.

Rhenaveer introduces him to Kithriarch Emioushameddhoran vel-Xianthellipse. She smiles and thanks him for his address without obvious sincerity. He tells her that he eagerly anticipates whatever her House may bring to the War effort with interest, which is *untrue because he no longer anticipates* anything*, least of all the finger paintings of hybrids.*

The Kithriarch summons a consociate childe, a taller, thinner female identified by her pellicule as an Ecclesiast. She is introduced as Thraenrellismeddhoran vel-Xianthellipse by the Kithriarch, apparently a student of amaranth technology.

Thraenrellis begins to tell him about her work. Goralschai recalls the trial of a combat amaranth some years prior to the War era. It is a childe's novelty with no real military application. The neonate is either babbling for want of anything to say, or else is simply an idiot, but he dutifully offers encouragement.

The other childrene cluster around, and Goralschai cannot decide whether their reticence is borne of admiration or fear. This is not the first time he has addressed a Newblood group and he is struck by how this batch respond with none of the usual patriotic clamour. They are, as Academician Rhenaveer observed, indifferent to the War. Knowing he should consider this an affront, Goralschai is surprised to find himself

unconcerned. He has of late come to regard the War with some degree of ambiguity.

One of the male childrene speaks, asking him about the Spike.

With some reluctance, he gives a brief account of his time as a Palatine, how the enemy attempted to hide the Vault of Heaven out there in the underspace. He is describing the final assault, the loss of the sectorate, when the childe interrupts, explaining that his interest is orthogonal rather than military, the structure of the Spike rather than the battles fought in its presence.

Goralschai wonders what he is doing here, just who benefits from this meeting. It strikes him that the hybrids have not understood a word, and that for all the difference it makes, they may as well be a different species.

He has nothing in common with them.

4.1 (east)

Next day they scoured the fields at the back of the house for herbs and other plants: tlazoteotecatl, a coarse grass they had found growing from an ant's nest; axocotl, which Primo knew as a hog plum; various seeds, flowers, nuts, moss, and roots. Doña Ultima had given no reason for this, but now, here at the lakeside, Primo had some ideas of his own.

'Evening will not come for another hour or so.' She bobbed her old grey head towards distant Popocatepetl and to the sun which hung above its peak. 'Dusk is neither day nor night. It is somewhere on the edge, where the earth is unsettled and things may move between worlds. It is a good place for us to do our work.'

There being very little her grandson could add to this, he said nothing.

Doña Ultima took a last puff of her cigar and tossed the stub. 'So tell me about your dream.'

'I was in the city, although it seemed very different.'

'There is a Mexico City down there in Tlalocan. All of those cities and towns are down there. Maybe you saw the city as it was, or the city as it will be.'

'You said that all of the past and the future are also to be found in the underworld.'

'Yes I did, child. Now what did you do when you were there? Did you meet with anyone?'

He recalled a face, white like a Spaniard or some anglo, arrogant like a king. 'I did, or at least there was someone else there, but I don't think I spoke with him.'

'It was not a woman?'

'No, an anglo. I have seen him somewhere before.'

'You saw no woman - short with dark hair, dressed like a clerk in a bank? You are certain?'

'Quite certain.' In the dream he watched the man bind logs with rope, building a stage or a platform, but somehow he could not quite find the words that would describe this endeavour. 'It was in the Zocalo, the great square with the cathedral and the national palace and the ruin of the Templo Mayor. I think maybe there was to be a festival.'

Doña Ultima frowned and it now seemed like she might be talking to

herself. 'That temple was the heart of the universe for those people. I do not think that can be a coincidence.'

Primo considered the aristocratic builder of platforms, then the foreign healer who treated his own historical namesake in that other dream, or experience, or whatever you would call it.

'Perhaps it means nothing.' Doña Ultima sighed.

The eastern sky turned mint chocolate green as the sun sank below the mountains, mirrored in waters disturbed only by small, skipping insects. Birds called from all around although none were close. The curandera took up position, still seated, skeins of netting held ready. Her wide, old body hardly seemed built for the reflexes of a hunter, and she cut a curious figure, hunched like a small, dark tiger about to pounce, occasionally taking a sip of beer then resuming her vigil.

After what felt like a half hour Primo succumbed to impatience, getting so far as *how much longer do we*— when his grandmother exploded, springing into the air to hurl the net across the rushes, then flying after it, oblivious to water soaking her skirt. There was a flurry of movement and a terrific harsh squawking as she wrestled with something amongst the reeds.

'Primo, bring me the twine and the bag quickly.'

Scarcely believing anything could have come so close without his knowledge, he did as asked. Some large, angry bird struggled beneath the arch of his grandmother's back, revealed only in the glare of a blood red eye, a grey wing beating at its captor. Then at last she stepped back, laying down the bag, secured at the neck with only long yellow legs bound in rough twine protruding.

Primo pulled the net from the water, and began rolling it into a large, wet ball.

'Huexocanauhtli - black-crowned night heron to you.' Doña Ultima mentioned this like it was not such a big deal and capturing large waterfowl was simply part of her daily routine, as perhaps it was. She stooped to gather up her beer, draining it with a satisfied noise.

'Okay. Now we go home. You take the net and I'll carry the bird.'

He stood for a second as the situation caught up with him. What they were doing seemed no longer like a game or a story that was happening to someone else. It was getting some way beyond the eccentric grandmother and her observance of traditions. This was happening.

He felt terrible as they walked through the fields in silence, and worse

by the time they were back in Cholula.

He tried not to think about the heron, alive, bewildered and blinking at him from the kitchen table, its beak taped up. Ultima had wrung its neck with a single twist. She'd asked *him* to do the deed, unwittingly driving him out to the back yard with a lump in his throat and mumbled words about *really* needing a beer, but had in the end done it herself.

It might have been nice to think she had spared him the task through familial compassion but it wasn't really her style.

'There are three parts to your soul.' Her voice came out to him, carried on the warm air of evening, gentle but entirely unrepentant. He could hear her at work but didn't want to look around, and nor did he have anything he wanted to say. The explanation rambled on over a sound that could have been nothing more unusual than someone fixing a meal, cutlery found in wooden drawers or herbs ground to pulp in a molcajete.

'The yolia is the breath, the part by which we live. The tonalli is in the head, and it is the heat and the part which travels to heaven. Then there is the ihiyotl, the dark shadow, the nagual; and it is my belief that your affliction results from damage done to that part of your soul.'

Primo knew plenty about the tripartite Nahua soul and was no longer in the mood to play the novice. The rest of it, that is the world according to Doña Ultima, held no interest for him at that moment. He couldn't think past the heron, blinking and looking around the kitchen, dazed and about to die. This was because of *him*, and he was responsible. He wished he hadn't come here.

This was some bullshit.

His grandmother droned on, and where her once querulous tone had seemed harmless, just the humour of old age, it now sounded cold and callous. She had thus far made not one concession to anything that lay outside of her own experience - all was to be done or else understood on her terms, and she was still talking.

'...this is why ordinary medicine would have no effect. If a man speaks only Spanish, and you answer his question in Nahuatl, then you will not be understood.'

She was silent for a moment.

'I am ready for you now, my child.'

Primo turned with some reluctance.

His grandmother stood waiting with a chair pulled out like she intended

to cut his hair. There were no obvious traces of her work, whatever she had been doing, no drop of blood or stray feather. She patted the back of the chair and smiled, a request for him to come and be seated, her sharper edge now dulled, so it seemed.

Somewhat numb, he did as bidden, and found a glass of clear liquid pushed into his grasp. He sniffed at it like it might be poisonous.

'Mezcal - it is good for the soul.' Doña Ultima settled a tender hand upon the crown of his head. 'I know you find this upsetting, Primo. I am glad that it is so, because there would be something wrong with you if you did not. You have a good heart, child.' She patted his shoulder.

He took one sip. An intoxicating warmth spread immediately to his face and limbs, and while he didn't exactly feel good about the situation, he felt different. All he had thought regarding the old woman a moment before, that she could see nothing of worlds beyond her own - such might equally well be applied to himself, he now realised. This was the first time he had known her to speak this way, with such unalloyed and sincere concern.

'Take off your shirt, please.'

He set down the glass and bared himself, leaving the pale cream guayabera in a heap on the table at his side, then leant forward to expose his wound. He saw her hand from the corner of an eye, fingers clutching a patch of cloth smeared with some dull brown paste. This was a piece of history, he knew, some specific recipe tailored to his condition that people like his grandmother had been preparing for at least the last five hundred years, possibly longer. It probably wasn't even written down.

Seconds passed and the poultice brought a tingle, damp and curiously soothing against the soreness at the base of his spine as Doña Ultima pressed strips of tape to his skin to keep it in place. She'd been rambling on all the while, muttering about twins and witches and people who should take the trouble to do things properly or else not do them at all. Little of the monologue had made enough sense to penetrate his mezcal glow.

Then she touched his upper arm just below the shoulder. Oddly, it was painful. He looked and saw her fingers dabbing gently at four small pinpricks.

'What is this, Primo?'

Dazed, he shook his head to indicate that he did not know and had no idea how he could have come by such an affliction. It resembled the marks left when he'd received inoculation against tuberculosis as a child. Something else tugged at his memory but remained out of reach.

Doña Ultima sighed. 'Well, one problem at a time, I suppose. Perhaps it is nothing.'

Primo took another sip of mezcal and felt noticeably improved within himself. The unpleasantness of the last few hours was over and done. He felt calm, like a great wind had ceased its howling, or a storm had passed. He stared out at the night sky, at the mesquite tree at the end of the yard. 'Doña Ultima, the owl I see here and in my dreams - that is *you*, truthfully?'

The old woman chuckled. 'You would not believe me if I told you. We belong to different worlds, you and I, but you are free to consider her your friend if it pleases you.'

'That's a screech owl, right?'

'Yes, the tecolotl.'

He recalled the name from *Florentine Codex*, a bird of ill-omen; although to be fair, of all the Franciscans, Father Sahagún had shown little interest in finding much that had been good about the culture his people had deigned to replace. Most aspects of the Precolombian world had tended to count as suspicious, if not actually derived directly from Satan.

Doña Ultima ruffled Primo's hair as though he were still in short trousers, although he did not mind. 'You must be careful who you speak to when you are down there. There are a lot of bad people in Tlalocan at the moment, many brujeros who will do you harm.'

'I understand.'

'Now we need to finish our work.' She took his shirt from the table and held it out for him. 'I'm afraid there may be some praying.'

4.2 (north)

Industrial gloom and a ray of upper window sunlight gleaming briefly off a shiny, black head: some guy from the office was coming over, waddling more than walking.

'How you doing, Mr. Boats?' Todd shifted the goggles from his eyes.

'I'm good.' The clerk ran a finger inside his shirt collar and made an awkward adjustment to a tie that looked like it had been fitted by machine. He peered over the top of his spectacles, hopeful of hearing something positive. 'How *you* doing, son?'

'I'm fine.'

'Okay, that's good to know.' Boats quickly glanced over his clipboard.

'I'mma need you pick up on Gordy's work some. You, Nelson and Spake, just up so far as lunch and we got ourselves all covered from there.'

'What happened to Gordy?' Todd cast his gaze around the warehouse. 'He was here just a half hour ago.'

'Gordy ain't well. We sent him home.'

'He ain't well?'

'That's what I said. Don't ask me, but I know it wasn't no put on or nothing.'

Annoyance creased Todd's face. 'Man, I'm already covering Church's fat ass!'

'Sorry, kid.' Boats shrugged. 'You just do what you can.'

'So tell me - he got *frostbite* too?'

Boats hoisted an eyebrow from behind his spectacles to show that if this was some joke, he wasn't in on it and didn't really care. 'Just do what you can, okay?'

The clerk waddled off leaving Todd to gaze at raggedy furniture mounting on the far side of the warehouse like a small wooden city. He'd upped the pace that morning, crushing dark thoughts with the dull mechanics of labour; and he'd done well, *better* than well, he'd done the work of two people. Now Boats was dumping *this* on him. He should have expected it, he knew. That was how it worked - sweat blood and give it all you've got, and the folk in charge decide that's your average and start looking around to see what other shit they can pile on your back.

Hey, how about I stick a broom up my ass and sweep the floor at the same time!

He needed a break. All the stuff he *hadn't* been thinking on was circling, looking for a way in, coyote thoughts of a world turning itself upside down: plants in his old room killed by frost damage; Justin somehow going down with hypothermia here in the July heat of south Texas; now Cristina Gutierez going nuts.

I said you were having great difficulty with your wife, his mother - more and more ill with each day - had cried. *She looked at me as though I was crazy. She said I had made it all up, and never had I told her about this child of mine*

Glancing around, Todd noted that Doug Hansen was in the office with some of the drivers. They would be tied up for a good few minutes. He

headed into the locker room, pulling off his goggles and rolling them into a ball with his gloves. He'd tell Johnson he'd been sick or something, that same imaginary back problem that had returned with a vengeance and all he needed was more time. It wasn't like he was the first to bail.

He thought of his mother, her world of dust and spooks. This was the part he couldn't deal with, the notion of this secret universe and how you were some kind of doofus if you didn't buy into it; and you were never allowed to call bullshit, because that just meant you didn't understand. Most everyone he knew had family across the border, and they all had a story about the brujeras down there, out in places where electricity and plumbing meant upwardly mobile: scary old witches that not even the most clear-headed guy in the world would wish to cross. Those old women could kill you with a word - so it was said - just one word and you were dead by dawn, the breath stolen right out of your body. He considered the notion of witches and their curses in relation to himself, then quickly chose to avoid that particular idea, at least for the moment.

Out in the warehouse, the coast seemed clear - just a few of the older guys hosing down tables and dressers, no sign of Mr. Boats or Hansen or anyone. Todd crossed the floor, slammed down the bar of the fire exit, and stepped out into the light.

He drove home, or at least he drove back to his mother's place. Her house now looked different, not like how his own place had seemed unfamiliar when he was visiting with alternative universe Selena, but *really* different. Having pulled over, he got out and walked up and down a few times to make sure he wasn't imagining anything. There was Jorge's place - whatever those people were called - then the Guzmans on the other side, and a house he didn't recognise between the two. The front lawn was all crabgrass; there was no tree, nor even a stump where it had been; the walls were pale cream rather than bright blue; the windows were new, as was the AC unit mounted to one side of the door.

It occurred to him that he should be flipping out right about this point, but all he could do was go with this thing, keep moving forward until it stopped.

He walked up the driveway. He pulled open the screen and saw that even the lock was different, but his key still worked, so he pushed at the handle and went into the house. Unfamiliar things in familiar places, like a show home. The front room was ordered and clinical, brand new furniture on a virginal sandalwood carpet and a white woman taking up the couch, looking straight back at him with not one trace of surprise. She had a bob

of short, dark hair and a wide, slightly bland face, about his mother's age - maybe late forties or early fifties. She was dressed in a black suit and crisp white shirt with, at her neck, a bootlace tie clasped by some piece of jewellery, a dark oval stone. She smiled like she wanted to talk home insurance.

She sounded British. 'You're taking this very well.'

Todd shook his head, almost laughed. Even the obvious question of *just who the hell are you?* wasn't going to come close to *this* shit. He went into the kitchen. The fridge was a different model, and there wasn't a whole lot in it, but all he wanted was a beer and the bottle of Dos Equis fit the bill - better than drinking on a Pabst, so maybe that was *something*. He found an opener in the drawer by the sink, popped the cap, and took a swig.

The woman filled the doorway, not so tall as he had thought, but stocky and officious.

'This is where you ask who I am and what I'm doing here.'

Todd felt a little drunk, light headed but more from situation than the mouthful he'd taken. 'You just go right ahead and tell me if you like. I'm listening.'

'You should have a seat.' She pulled a chair out from the table.

He considered it a moment, then sat. 'You must be some kind of witch, I figure.'

She failed to react, but leant herself against the work surface. 'You don't really believe that.'

He shrugged. 'I ain't know *what* I believe right now.'

'I'm Lorraine.' She smiled, or at least tried. 'I already know your name.'

'Lorraine.'

'Lorraine Conti, but anyway, as I'm sure you will have noticed—'

'You're in the mob or something. You got that kind of Italian look, and the name,' - he studied her clothes, face creased by jumbled thoughts. There had been a female boss in an episode of *The Sopranos*, also Lorraine if memory served; carried herself with that same dark, heavy authority. 'Guess I should just let you speak your piece, huh?'

Conti took a sharp, even breath and met his eye. 'Todd, I'm afraid I must inform you that you are involved in something far bigger than you can possibly understand.'

'Yeah.' He took another swig of beer. 'I figured that much out for

myself.'

'I'm sure.'

'I'm still listening though. Go right ahead and explain shit if that's why you're here.'

Another sharp breath. 'There's a war; *The* War so far as you, I, or anyone else is concerned.'

The inference was obvious - something a few levels above drama on the Mexican border or whatever was happening in Afghanistan, something way beyond the ordinary. Todd considered all the bullshit conspiracy theories he'd heard, secretive powers and dark forces and the unexplained: a shiver of apprehension as he wondered which of these would now be revealed as truth. He regarded his uninvited visitor, her sharp black suit and oddly bland face. The inevitable conclusion had presented itself and he sighed.

'So where you from - Fort Worth, Edwards, some place like that?'

Conti seemed confused. 'I don't follow...'

'Okay, look,' - he raised the bottle to his lips - 'whatever this is, I've had the freakiest damn month you can imagine. Whatever you got to say ain't gonna be no more crazy than sitting in some stranger's house knowing my own mother lived here most her life up until three hours back, so I'd appreciate it if you cut the crap. I can handle it.'

The woman was silent, unsettled.
Todd drank, then set the bottle down with a little more force than intended. 'Maybe you're trying to do the right thing, break it to me gentle...'

'We're in the middle of a conflict fought upon cosmic scale. The history of this culture is just one of many contested territories.' Conti met his eye, supremely indifferent to his unalloyed suspicion. 'I'm afraid you're somewhat caught up.'

He stared at his beer as an unfamiliar clock ticked in the front room, allowing an entire minute to slip past before breaking his silence. 'I figured maybe some brujera laid a curse on me.'

'Well, I suppose there are worse ways of putting it.'

'So give me a better one.'

She delivered her diagnosis like a doctor, impressing upon him that this was a truth to which he would simply have to adjust. 'You are a notional complex of narrative mass suspended within a memeplex of raw information roughly encompassing mythic ideals of entropy and inertia.'

'Right. Mythic ideals.'

'Are you familiar with Plato?'

'I always preferred *Tom and Jerry*. Mickey and the gang were just way too wholesome.'

Conti groaned. 'Well, mythic ideals as death totem, the embodiment of a process.' She touched a hand to her collar, to the dark jewel at her neck. 'This is the one thing ensuring that I won't fall ill in your presence, that my blood won't freeze solid in my veins; and I might point out that I would hardly be likely to tell you any of this if I didn't have your best interests in mind.'

If that was true I don't see as how you would feel the need to even mention it, Todd thought to himself. Again he raised the bottle to his lips, drinking down the beer with a mouthful of ice crystals. 'All I want is my family back.'

The woman stared at him, calm.

'You never had a family.'

4.3 (west)

I am not right, Emiousha thought. *I am out of sorts, and I do not know why*. The sensation had been there in the background since she awoke from slumber. It lingered like a shadow, slipping from view each time she paused to consider what fresh burden could have set her so ill at ease.

...like a shadow.

Thraenrellis, having lost the errant shade, had scoured the house with an amaranth from air gallery to entrance vault. The intruder left a trail of discontinuous space, at least discontinuous in the context of the Netherweald; a trail which, having reached the highest point of the chapterhouse, doubled back on itself, leading down and outside before stopping dead at the flaw. It was therefore something from beyond which had gained entrance, looked around, then left, or at least that was Pyrhentana's theory. Emiousha preferred the thought that, whatever it had been, the shadow was gone and could no longer be counted amongst her problems.

Gedarra took a different view, and it displeased Emiousha to hear such chatter given voice here in the nosocomion amongst such a wealth of other, more tangible concerns. She regarded the Omniscian with great patience.

'It's House Paradox, isn't it? You're going to tell me that this is their work, that all which has transpired since we came to the Netherweald is their doing.'

'The self-aware shadow would seem to represent a clue, no?' Gedarra sniffed, averting her gaze. 'It really isn't such a leap of faith.'

Stomach now churning, the Kithriarch lowered herself into the cathedra next to Laethynrisa's catafalque, the palm of one hand absently placed across her abdomen. She found this slight pressure reassuring. It seemed to diminish her nausea, although equally it reminded her of a likeness seen in an aesculapian folio Goralschai had kept in his pannier chamber. The illustration had depicted some lesser species biomorph in the later stages of clock plague, bent double, uselessly clutching at digestive organs. She had no desire for the childrene to see their Kithriarch in such a reduced state, sickness and biology personified.

There was a moment of ungainly silence in which Emiousha had been expected to offer some rebuttal of the Omniscian's dreary idea, but the unconscious Nuris intervened. His speech was barely legible, the same meaningless litany that had served for the last words of Herrare, Amonis, Envane and the other males, a whisper of breath like dead leaves. Emiousha offered up silent thanks for this distraction from Gedarra's need to invoke House Paradox every time somebody twisted their ankle. The childrene were taking too readily to supposition as a form of currency.

She had been sorely tempted to cite the example of Agmeni, the regent of Chaon Gacca famously driven from his throne by animate shadows, specifically shadows animated by forces which had never even *heard* of the Homeworld let alone any of its Houses, Great or otherwise; but she knew that the point would have been lost in the present climate of hysteria.

Nuris spoke of the trip down to the river, describing stones cold beneath his feet. Soon he would describe the dog, and then the river itself before returning to the beginning of the account. The cadence of the tale suggested a level of consciousness, even a possibility of recovery, but experience confirmed that such hopes were in vain. The blight had only one conclusion.

Coincidence had illustrated this progression towards extinction with the three catafalques nearest to the nosocomion wall, of which Nuris occupied the middle position. To his right lay Arven, recently committed, unconscious but not yet given to speech. To his left there lay a greasy mound of ash that no-one had yet seen fit to clear away. This was all that

remained of Insoleanis who only one houseday past had been laid in the some spot mumbling his own variant of the threnody about dogs encountered upon the banks of great rivers.

It resembled mythology, something derived from a lesser species, but House Meddhoran's athenæum had been conspicuously lacking in reference material which might confirm such an idea since even before everything regressed to ink and paper. Gedarra's theory was that it came from some errant skein of outsider biodata coded into the breeding engine when the chapterhouse was seeded, something thrown in there to see what would happen and which had now surfaced as a somewhat meaningless swan song.

Thraenrellis entered, struggling with a huge hidebound volume brought up from the athenæum. 'I've found your biologue. I have something to show you.'

All eyes went to Laethynrisa to whom this was addressed, then to the book as it was set down upon the caryatid by her catafalque. The Ecclesiast took the top corner of the heavy wooden cover and laid it back, repeating the action for the uneven sheaves that were revealed, carefully folding them to the left until she came upon the desired section. Symbols crawled across the page in an order entirely their own, raw archemathic codes collapsed down into trails of blue and black pigment. These were words belonging to the same fundamental language that Rhodenet was busily scribbling across the stones of the Netherweald.

'Here. I believe this passage corresponds to specific aspects of your baseline biology, crude cellular matter in this instance.' Thraenrellis ran her finger around a group of symbols arranged in the form of a spiral. 'See here...'

Gedarra crowded in, peering over Emiousha's shoulder, grimacing a little at the coarse aesculapian details of her consociate's exposed physicality. 'Does that signify growth of some description?'

'Of *some* description.' The Ecclesiast spared her consociate a somewhat distant glance. 'Laethynrisa is suffering minor eukaryotic increase. She is carcinomic, if we are to be blunt.'

'Then this is not the blight?'

Three silent faces answered Gedarra to signify that *obviously* it wasn't the blight.

For Emiousha's part, still irritated by the Omniscian's wearisome

fixation with House Paradox, she had partaken in the snub as a matter of principal. Truthfully though, she was less certain. The blight, near done with the males, could have migrated, embarking upon a rout of the female line by different means. Watching these newer codes scribbled directly onto the pages of Laethynrisa's biologue as though by an invisible hand, it occurred to her that she might compare them with archemathic signatures left in the wake of the blight. If this were the same pestilence which had devoured Herrare and the others, it would reveal itself.

Announcing that there were certain matters requiring her attention, the Kithriarch made for the egress. Out upon the landing she paused with a steadying hand to the wooden jamb. Those last few moments with Laethynrisa and her affliction had provided distraction, but an awareness of her own uncertain state now returned. The memory of the Towering Man came back, his repellent bulk coming towards her with corrupt intent.

Her insides ached with discord and the turmoil left her light upon unbalanced feet, and there was a dull, pounding sensation in her head entirely unlike anything she had before experienced. She recalled dining earlier in the houseday, rye cake with meat and apples. There had been nothing wrong with the food, although the simple idea of such flavours upon her tongue seemed presently overwhelming and unpleasant.

She forcibly cast the notion from her thoughts and rallied on with sturdy breaths and feet set to the steps, taking unexpected comfort from the rhythm of ascent. Coming to the first landing, she stopped, believing that she had heard some echo of her own footfalls, a sharp wooden sound, and distant, something that could not belong; and this deferral took the opportunity to present the Kithriarch with the folly of her expedition.

She was heading for the athenæum.

She intended to consult the biologues of Herrare and Amonis, specifically those passages relating to the blight; the blight being a condition which destroyed both the body and its history leaving *all* evidence of its ever having existed scrubbed from the continuity, memory excepted.

She had gone in search of biologues she already knew to be missing.

'I think I am going insane.'

Spoken aloud, their faint echo resonating up and down the great vertical hollow of the escalier, the words did nothing to disabuse their author of her suspicion.

Again she heard that sound, the echo, rising up from somewhere below keeping perfect time with the footsteps she would have left behind had she not been presently stood quite still.

Clack... clack... clack...

It could be Rhodenet coming in from the Netherweald, or perhaps some other childe, although on this latter point she was certain of the others being up in the air gallery. In any case it didn't sound like footsteps. It was louder, slower, something more primal than made sense even within a regressed chapterhouse. She envisioned someone cutting wood at the edge of a forest, but had no idea where such an image could have come from.

There was something wrong with gravity, her knees, a spasm...

The Kithriarch now found herself sat at the upper step, a sickly sweat cooling upon her brow as she glared down towards the ingress of the nosocomion. There was no problem with the gravity, she knew, or at least no problem with whatever provided the illusion of gravity - it was *her*, her weak, convulsing legs, her encroaching illness.

Clack... clack... clack...

The sound remained constant, neither nearer nor further away.

Pretending to hear nothing she would not have expected to hear, she stood, clinging to the balustrade for support. Ascent was out as a practical option, even leaving aside the fact that she had made for herself the errand of an addlepate. Breathing deeply, carefully, she set a foot down onto the next step, then another, and made her way towards the landing.

For the second time she entered the nosocomion. The childrene were just as they had been only moments before, Gedarra and Thraenrellis gathered about Laethynrisa's catafalque. The biologue still lay open and remained the subject of discussion.

Thraenrellis did not look around but nevertheless beckoned. 'You must see!'

Animated, the Ecclesiast's apparent excitement bordered on palpable, or if not excitement then at least a suggestion of some new discovery made far beyond ordinary experience. Emiousha pushed between two catafalques and looked to the open leaves of the biologue, absently noticing that once again her nausea had abated.

Archemathic characters scrolled across the page, circling and expanding as they had before, but now there was an increased sense of the familiar in the forms described.

The Kithriarch moved in for a closer look, noting specific signifiers distinguishing the cluster from its host material.

'This is biodata.' Even as she spoke, Emiousha realised how absurd it sounded.

The four of them succumbed to silence, lacking a vocabulary which might be applied to a situation of this nature, the spontaneous gestation of a neonate hominid inside a childe.

Emiouisha regarded Laethynrisa and wondered if *mother* was the appropriate term.

4.4 (south)

The stench was too strong, the essence of conflagration scorched into the air, coarse with ash and the taste of charred wood in Momacani's throat. He kicked at the embers with a foot, overturning a charred brick of matter with the toe of his sandal. The underside had been afforded a small degree of protection where it fell, the carved features of Chantico still discernible - her cactus spine headdress and huipil, eyes now twin smudges in a blackened face. The ruined idol was light in his hand, near weightless, as though some intangible element had gone from it.

Two other Ixtilque picked around in the burned out ruins of the temple. The fire had taken only the wooden shrine with its thatched covering, sweeping them from the platform with no damage to the stone, no *physical* damage; the metaphysical violation was another matter.

A crowd had gathered around the base of the temple, upturned faces silent with concern. A couple of eagle knights stood amongst them so as to make it clear that none would be instituting their own impromptu inspection of the site. Momacani gazed out past the limits of the square to the rest of the city, but most of Tenochtitlan was lost to fog and the mountains were invisible.

Matlacoatl came forward, stepping gingerly over a wooden buttress turned to charcoal, lifting the edge of his cape so as to keep it from trailing in soot. 'You have found something.'

Momacani spared a glance at his broken idol. 'I do not like to see such things.'

'It is a very great obscenity that this should happen.' Matlacoatl took the idol from his colleague's hand and turned it over. 'This is a desecration.'

'You were here last night at the height of the storm?'

'I was, although by your account I believe Xochimilco fared worse than Tenochtitlan. That is the great mystery, that I saw no lightning strike which could have lit this pyre.' He passed the idol back. 'This does not feel like the work of any God or spirit with whom we are familiar.'

Momacani stared at the ruined figure of Chantico, a dying, pleading thing, an abandoned child to be swept away with the rest of the debris. 'Could even the lowest, the most stupid of those within the earth be moved to such as this?'

Chitilma now joined them. He too wore simple clothes, the anonymous cotton robe and cape denoting no specific office, although the hem of his garment was smudged with dirt and ash. He spared an awkward glance to the small crowd. It hardly needed stating that some would wonder at the presence of three commoners, asking why no delegate of the priesthood had yet arrived.

'Doubtless Xocoyotzin will soon be present. He will wish only to make trouble.'

A disparaging murmur passed amongst the three and they ascended the steps, leaving the burned temple to mist and fog.

Soon they were back at the Calmecac, a long, low building at the western edge of the square, a great painted facade punctuated midway with a wide entrance raised upon stone columns where knights stood guard. The Ixtilcalli lay within the main inner courtyard, an unassuming part of the complex with the outward appearance of a storehouse. Passing into the Ixtilcalli, the three came to a yet smaller courtyard.

Chitilma seated himself upon the lowest step of the central shine. 'I suppose we must consider the prophecy. The attack upon Chantico's temple was foretold, if we are to believe such things.'

A look passed between the other two, and Matlacoatl spoke. 'This may be part of some larger problem. The conflagration was foretold as are many events which never come to pass. I would say that of thirteen such predictions, it is right that no more than seven should be borne out.'

A shadow seemed to flash in the darkness, a movement within the covered part of the Ixtilcalli. Momacani stared, trying and failing to penetrate the interior gloom.

Matlacoatl was scowling. 'I have studied records dated back to the first of Tozoztontli, half of a year for which a bothersome eleven of every

thirteen such predictions have proven true.'

Chitilma effected a wry smile. 'Then some records are missing.'

'One might think so, but that not being the case, we have a problem. Fate, as we know, does not work by such means. This is therefore the work of something *other* than fate.'

At that moment Momacani was absorbed in consideration of the idol of Chantico. The *ixihtec* - the essence would be retained within the wood, specifically the ixihtec of the conflagration, including that of cause, perhaps even of its arsonist author. Sadly the divination of such details still lay beyond the scope of even those most tainted by sacred forces.

A tang of body odour and faecal matter wrestled the thought from his head as the priest Tlohtoxcatl arrived. Caked from neck to ankle in soot and grime, his untrained hair a mass of knotted tentacles, their senior clerical liaison resembled nothing so much as a great predatory spider. He bowed a greeting to the group and beckoned a scribe to come forth from the shadow. The menial hurried over and seated himself, a stiff sheet of bark paper across his knee.

The three Ixtilque in turn echoed the bowed greeting, and Matlacoatl offered an apology, explaining that nothing new had come of their inspection of the burnt temple.

Tlohtoxcatl shook his head. 'My hopes were not high on that count, but there are other matters requiring our attention,' - he fixed Momacani with a piercing eye - 'whether Lord Huemac once again walks amongst us as a man, for one.'

The Ixtilli sighed. 'Atonal claimed to have secured a deal with the dead Lord, thirteen further years on this earth for servitude in the lands below, as I see you already know.'

The priest nodded and gestured for more as the scribe began to paint.

Momacani continued. 'Whilst it is possible that Atonal encountered a spirit summoned forth from Mictlan, I do not think the meeting would have proven so vivid had he been not quite so thirsty. The man, if you will forgive my candour, is a *rabbit*.'

As one, the Ixtilque shook their heads and submitted a collective sigh.

'Everyone is a rabbit these days.' Muttering darkly to himself, Tlohtoxcatl grimaced beneath horizontal bars of face paint. 'It will be a miracle if there is a man amongst us still able to walk in a straight line by the time we come to drill New Fire.'

A couple of attendants entered carrying reed mats, followed by others bearing drinking vessels, a jug of water, and a platter of dried fruit. These were set upon the flagstones before the shrine at the courtyard's centre. The senior priest beckoned and the group took to their mats in a crude circle.

Momacani selected a tomato. 'This man Atonal made a puzzling and insulting reference to the founder of our city, saying that the Acamapichtli we revere was a monstrous twin.'

Tlohtoxcatl chewed then swallowed a morsel of dried nopal. 'It is a tale that was once popular in Chalco and Xochimilco. It gave comfort to those who resented the legitimacy of our dynasty.'

'It is therefore untrue?'

'Witchcraft was practised upon our founder and he was made unwell. His cure was brought about by a foreign healer of reputedly bizarre appearance. The remainder is nonsense, a conspiracy which thrives only because it amuses the impoverished and cannot be disproven. The records are full of such stories. They are strange, even entertaining, but they go nowhere. I believe you yourself were present when the Ixomitectin came to Tenochtitlan many years ago.'

The *bone-mask people* - Momacani had seen their bodies only briefly, back during the reign of Ahuizotl - *Those of the Lineage of Time Twisted upon Itself*, or the Mocolxiutecatl. That fleeting encounter seemed now very much like a dream, and certainly it could no longer be considered entirely part of *this* world.

Tlohtoxcatl had moved on. 'You will recall Lord Achicatzin's sighting of the Towering Man.'

There was a murmur of concurrence.

No longer able to ignore the motion in the shadows, Momacani delivered his plea and hoped it did not seem too poor an excuse. 'I have a pressing need to produce dung, if you will permit me a brief absence.'

Duly excused, he stole into the interior, treading as softly as possible through the first chamber, then into the second. Little daylight found this part of the building, and no torch had yet been lit. He stood still and listened as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. The angled walls served to dampen sound: he could hear the distant rumble of his colleagues discussing Lord Achicatzin, but there was something else, a low noise somewhere ahead. Here in darkness, the world of intrusive inner voices and moving shadows seemed that much closer. For a moment he considered

places where daily life would cross over to those realms beyond the earth. The threshold was believed to reside below ground in caves and sinkholes, but maybe it was simply any place away from the harsh definition of light.

There was a movement in the darkness, then another sound - the scuff of a sandal.

Momacani threw himself forward, slamming into some beast with limbs that scratched and flailed. There was a cry, more a whimper as he bundled a struggling body to the floor. This was no intrusive spirit, but a man, perhaps even a child - not so large as he first thought. He caught a wrist and yanked the body towards daylight. It was a youth of not more than thirteen years with the face of a cornered animal.

'What are you doing here?' Even as he spoke he saw the square cotton bag upon the boy's shoulder, dried fruit strewn across the floor during their struggle. 'Have you lost all sense?'

The child swung out a leg to kick, but with both hands held at his back he lost balance. As he hit the floor, a foot was forced sideways beneath his own weight and he cried out in pain.

Momacani listened for the approach of anyone who might have heard, but found only silence.

He regarded the intruder, now massaging an ankle, face twisted with resistance. 'Your foolishness will feed no-one, if that was your hope.'

'We are hungry.' The voice was weak, quite unsuited to thorny words. 'Everyone is hungry, all of the people.'

The Ixtilli shook his head, his response a terse whisper. 'Hungry yes, but not starving. The fields may be dry but the storehouses are well stocked. There is no need for you to get yourself into such trouble. You must surely know the penalty for stealing from the Calmecac.'

He had heard this same cry of famine in the market, the streets and canals, in people's homes, and now he recognised his rebuke for what it was: a straight reiteration of what the odious Tenquauhui had said to him the previous morning at Huixachtepetl.

The child's head sank, the fight gone from him. 'In any case, it no longer matters.'

Momacani fought back the impulse of a curse. 'I am not going to deliver you over to the knight, but do not bring such disgrace on your family again. This is a terrible and stupid thing.'

'I did not mean for myself or what is to become of me.' The boy sighed

as though unable to believe he was conversing with such an idiot. 'I meant the New Fire, and that he is going to kill us all. He is pulling our hair, stepping upon our teeth. *None* of this now matters!'

There was nothing that could be said.

Momacani pulled the thief to his feet and wondered what lie he would spin the guards.

4.5

Ordnance-Tetrarch Goralschai considers the congress and decides that of all the assembled biomorphs, it seems a safe bet that not one has experienced genuine conflict. Doubtless many are primed with combat subjectives during looming, but that's hardly comparable.

He is stood next to a veteran of the Aloophoa campaign, one who appears unhappy and is engaged in a private monologue culminating with what sounds like a rhetorical question regarding the military value of those gathered before him. His point is obscure, doubtless insane.

Goralschai studies the face and notes how one side is knotted with scar tissue. He knows this individual but cannot recall any name. His uniform identifies him as Ordnance-Decurion.

Dampening fields keep Goralschai's thoughts listless and crucially to himself. This is fortunate, many of those present having been hothoused with defences triggered by even the most innocuous of musings. His consociate's monologue might inspire a bloodbath under other circumstances.

Spines bristle from the hide of the biomorph at the end of the first line, an aesthetic of menace bred into every last curve of its bioengineered carapace.

Goralschai's generation are historically referenced as first wave. Those present are third or maybe fourth - it's not so easy to tell the difference. The more extreme Palatines bear no resemblance to anything remotely biological. One is a series of crystalline growths fluxing and phasing within a field of accelerated time; another is an animate lattice of metal; and then there is a space in the ranks, an empty place inspiring thoughts of disease and decay.

Countless millennia of order and tradition have somehow conspired to culminate in this moment, this parade of mongrel biodata hoisted aloft like a flag whilst the Great Houses look on with pride. This surely cannot be

how it was supposed to happen. Faced with such monstrosities, one would be forgiven the impression that the enemy has already won.

The Aloophoa veteran continues to mumble, whether for his own benefit or that of anyone else remaining unclear. Making eye contact, his diatribe takes on intrusive intimacy.

'We clean and we clean and you've worked hard and you need to offer up damage or be monitored for risk in your own life. You will be recorded. That is what we approved. You've worked hard to clean up the damage or you are not recovered. We can give you a replacement. We can offer that. You've worked hard...'

Goralschai cannot listen to this litany of a present that should not have happened.

Vicereine Iseult steps forward and pins a green circlet of exotic metal to his breast. She talks of services rendered and a debt of gratitude whilst pretending not to have noticed the mumbling monologue of the Ordnance-Decurion. This is Goralschai's reward. It defines him as a hero of the first wave, an ideal to which those assembled may aspire, a figurehead by which future waves may be sanctioned. Additionally, it denotes his status as surplus to requirements. His contribution is appreciated but times have changed.

Iseult addresses the assembly, listing his distinctions. Goralschai recalls no specific incident of courage from the minor apocalypse of his military career, just survival and action as he deemed necessary. If there is victory here, it is his having lived long enough to attend this ceremony. Any action he might himself regard as being of value would hold no meaning for these childrene of the third wave - or fourth wave, or whichever, but the Academicians and Strategists of House Xianthellipse don't otherwise know what to do with him.

Considering the crowd, he wonders how long it will be before one of their number is stood in his place, casting an eye across some future wave and wondering if it amounted to anything.

5.1 (east)

'Tell me, there is an animal which has meaning for you?' Doña Ultima wrinkled her face.

He knew he was still in Cholula because there was a bedspring sticking in his ass and bird song outside the window, but as Primo stared up at the vast arch of rock and earth overhead, this did not strike him as a contradiction; nor did the fact of that rock and earth containing sky, stars and clouds. *I am dreaming*, he decided and was excited by the thought. His grandmother had told him about Tlalocan, so doubtless there was an element of suggestion; unless her claims were true and this was in some sense real. Then again, maybe he was missing the point; perhaps it was the experience that mattered, regardless of its foundation.

Doña Ultima repeated her question.

Primo thought about the tiny rattler in the hallway the night before last.

'That is a good choice.' Doña Ultima seemed to approve. 'The chiauhcoatl: like yourself, he comes from the east, from the place where the first light emerges each day.'

He wasn't entirely sure what she was getting at, but said nothing. True enough, the serpent was an eastern creature by Nahua terms, a symbol of earth and generation, reborn each time it shed its skin, quite aside from the more obvious phallic connotations. It was originally depicted as such on the national flag, united with an eagle representing air and spirit, an alchemical union of opposing yet complementary forces. Of course, the Christians got it wrong with their eagle devouring the snake as a crude metaphor for the triumph of good over evil, reducing everything to the usual black and white so as not to alienate anyone otherwise too stupid to get it.

They walked on, crossing the great plain below a sky of stone and soil. Ultima drew her rebozo tight against the cold then chuckled to herself. 'It is not as you expected.'

Primo, who had not expected anything in particular, shrugged in concession to conversation. 'We are a long way from the sun. I suppose fire and brimstone would be out of place down here.'

'It will be easier once we are certain that your nagual is safe and well. I

do not wish to make a career out of trapping herons, and clearly you do not have the stomach to go through that again.'

'It will be easier?' Primo hadn't understood the implication.

The old woman made a wild gesture at the subterranean landscape. 'Getting from one place to another. I told you, there are many wicked people in Tlalocan, and better ways to travel than on foot but we should not risk them at present. We must be vigilant.'

Primo felt himself turn over in bed to elude the sting of wire poking at his behind. *This is still a dream*, he reminded himself. The point was reinforced by the sight of a wrestler in full mask and cape stood a little way away talking to a small boy in striped pyjamas with a tray of chicles.

'Saint John takes care of the animals down here.' Doña Ultima nodded her old, grey head at the horizon to where the sweep of the plain was broken by a huddle of buildings and the wooden fencing of a corral. 'If all is well, that is where we shall find your nagual.'

The drone of a motor vehicle emerged from the enveloping silence, and Primo felt his grandmother's steadying hand upon his forearm, a conduit for her panic. This was not some sound carried through a bedroom window upon Cholula's cool morning air. *All of the past and the future are to be found in the underworld*, she had said to him. *Echoes of above are heard below.*

'The bruja - that is the one I told you about!' Ultima hissed her warning through gritted teeth.

The automobile sped along, windshield all but obscuring two bodies, giving them the appearance of action figures not yet released from their packaging. The passenger was female, officious. The driver was a boy, maybe a little older than a teenager. He seemed familiar. The vehicle passed, crimson tail lights receding in the gloom, but the old woman retained her grip on Primo's arm. He could feel blood coursing through the vein in her thumb with nervous haste.

Some distance away, a face appeared around the edge of an erratic outcrop of sandstone, an observer in plain white robe and deer hide sandals. Doña Ultima groaned, exasperated.

'I am an old woman. I have neither the means nor the art for dealing with such trouble as this.'

Primo had turned over again. The bedspring resumed its assault upon his behind, scoring a hot, angry scratch as morning sunlight scorched his

eyes. He opened them and looked about the room, struggling to wrap sluggish thoughts around the prospect of a new day. This was Cholula de Rivadavia, he remembered, not the familiar walls of his bedroom back in Coatlinchan. He'd been dreaming, he knew, but it was still too soon to consider the details.

Untangling himself from heavy woollen sheets, he set feet to the floor and forced himself to stand, stretching and yawning as the smell of cooking and coffee found his nose. The scrape and sizzle of a skillet filtered through from the kitchen as a herald of breakfast. He pulled on his jeans and went over to the wash basin in the corner of the room, squeezing toothpaste onto the bristles of a brush in haphazard fashion. Working away at his back teeth, he drifted across to the window. Something moved upon the fence post at the other side of the yard, quick and serpentine.

He had been in Tlalocan, some sort of farm or perhaps a menagerie. A tall, gaunt man with a heavy beard and red robe had been explaining his work as the custodian of all animals. This would have been either Saint John or else some fusion of the Apostle and Mixcoatl or possibly Camaxtli. Whichever was the case, the custodian took Primo to see a rattler, his nagual no doubt, which was kept in the oldest part of the corral - the oldest being the most secure.

Trust me on this, Saint John had told him. *You have to go along with things, let them happen.*

He'd come to Cholula so that Doña Ultima could treat the injury that had defeated medical science, or at least *Farmacias Similares*. Now she was stoking flames, drawing him into her world. She was his grandmother and he loved her, but he had found himself reminded of the *Florentine Codex* and Sahagún's description of the evil sorcerer, the one who *without understanding, claims to know about God*, who *makes things complicated*, who *entangles them with difficulties*.

Crossing back to the basin, he spat out a mouthful of saliva and toothpaste, washed his face, and pulled on a clean shirt. Doña Ultima turned from the stove as he entered the kitchen. Unsmiling, she gestured for him to be seated at the table.

'You are rested? You slept well?'

'I'm good.'

He watched her fill a plate with eggs, tomatoes and beans, then pour a thick, dark mole sauce over the assemblage. She set the plate before him and brought over a cloth of corn tortillas. Her silence was, as ever, an

impenetrable veil across her thoughts, and Primo began to feel uncomfortable as he took up his fork and ate.

'I had another of those dreams.' Immediately he regretted his failure to pursue some other avenue of idle chatter, cursing his own lack of resolve, his once again conceding to play along with his grandmother; but children are predisposed towards pleasing adults, and it was difficult to curb the impulse under the circumstances of her apparent displeasure.

Ultima poured him a coffee from the pot. 'You have found your nagual, child. He will guide you from here on. He will take good care of you if treat him well.'

'Okay.' Primo chewed, tasting a hunk of meat mixed in with eggs. The mole was thick with chilli and had obscured the flavour. For no obvious reason, he recalled a moment in the corral, talking to Saint John, looking over the divine shoulder and seeing people taking breakfast in the ranch house, campesinos, or maybe they too were saints of some description. Curiosity had drawn him back to his grandmother's world of shadows and rumours.

'The anglo woman in the automobile, so if she was Yaotl—'

'Are your ears full of wax? Do you not listen?' Her tone was level, anger tempered by regret. 'I am an old woman. I have neither the means nor the art for dealing with such trouble as this.'

She glanced across towards the yard, to the open shutters where a small stone idol sat, still guarding the threshold. 'I will pray for you, and your little snake will watch over you providing that you learn to speak with him. I wish I could do more, but that is just how it is.'

The silence that followed became oppressive, a storm cloud hidden behind the sun. Primo ate his breakfast and drank his coffee as his grandmother went outside. He watched her in the back yard smoking her cigar and his eyes came to rest upon the stone idol, the one she found. It looked very different in the daylight, and what he had taken for roughly carved volutes of flame around the headdress were quite clearly stylised spindles of cotton. He would have to take another look at the pictographic relief upon her back before he left. It now seemed more likely that she represented a fusion of a number of Hearth Goddesses, otherwise her resembling Tlazolteotl whilst carrying the*Nine Dog* pictogram on her back made no sense.

Before he left...

Maybe this was why Doña Ultima appeared so upset. He had not seen her in some time; he might not see her again for some time to come, and now he felt uneasy about his own moderately rancorous thoughts. She was, as she had herself noted, an old woman. Perhaps he had been selfish, ungrateful even. He finished his breakfast, drained the coffee mug, and went over towards the yard. Pausing at the step, he went down and took hold of the idol, hoping to angle it away from the wall so as to reveal the carvings upon its back. It would not budge, so he craned his neck to look behind for nine raised dots and the locative cartouche that had identified her as Chantico. There was only a crude surface of lumpy basalt.

'Did you enjoy your breakfast?'

Ultima stood over him, grinning through a cloud of cigar smoke.

Startled, he staggered to his feet. 'Yes. It was delicious. You make very good mole.'

'That is true. I cannot deny it.' She chuckled to herself, her mood at last risen as she strolled back out into the morning sunlight.

Primo glanced down at the idol, then thought better of further debating its shifting identity. Stuffing hands into his pockets, he went out into the garden. Aside from a distant wash of highway traffic, the air was still and quiet, warmed by the first sunlight of morning.

'Did you cook the heron?'

She peered at him curiously. 'Did I do *what*?'

Primo wondered why small talk always became such a minefield in his grandmother's presence. 'The meat with the eggs - I believed that you had cooked up the bird from last night.'

'You thought I had cooked the heron?'

He imagined himself explaining how their ancestors would almost certainly have eaten such birds, and then recalled the time a neighbour had called and she had introduced him as her anthropologist, so he let it go with a noncommittal shrug.

'That was chicken. Our friend the heron decided that he did not much like being dead and flew away whilst you were asleep.'

Primo quickly decided that she was joking.

5.2 (north)

Conti was clearly tired of repeating herself but Todd didn't

care. *Everything he'd ever known turned out to be a lie*, as the voiceover for the movie of his life would one day promise. Even if it wasn't her fault, it seemed right that she should bear responsibility for bringing bad news, *and* for rubbing it in his face with stuff off the internet - her proof of the impossible. He could turn his head to see those two incriminating sheets of print on the back seat of his ride, but the road ahead held greater consequence for the moment.

One was a pay statement hacked from some cleaning company, four hundred pesos paid to María de la Vega Lunas for the month of April with her address in a suburb of Mexico City. The place was called San Miguel Coatlinchan, and Conti had printed up a screen shot from a video clip taken in the area, traditional Aztec dancers working their hokey magic before a fountain with a massive statue of some old God, the very same María de la Vega Lunas staring into the lens of the anonymous tourist: his mother the random stranger. Todd had never had much truck with computers on account of how they tended to crash in his presence, but he knew enough to understand that it was easy enough to fake this sort of stuff. The mystery was why anyone would bother, and that in itself seemed to support its being legit.

'So my mom was never my mom is what you're telling me.' He drummed fingers against the wheel. He was of a notion that it annoyed his passenger, which was reason enough.

'Yes and no.' Conti stared out across the desert, already bored with Nuevo León and the North Mexican desert. 'Your mother would have crossed the border and married Peter Calavero, but she already had a child and never left Mexico City; and yet here you are.' Her tone did not suggest that she considered this a positive outcome.

'Here I am.'

'Here you are, rolling along in your little hamster ball of time without past or future, just eternal present, an oxbow existence with everyone you've ever known as a purely subjective experience.' She'd already told him this in so many words. It now seemed she was getting off on the poetry of the idea. 'Todd Calavero really is quite an unusual name.'

He glanced across at her, newly suspicious. 'I guess it would kill you to just come right out with whatever the hell it is you're gonna say.'

'Have you ever considered what it could mean?'

He hadn't, which he had to admit seemed kind of strange. He said nothing, reluctant to concede points to this woman.

Automotive silence resumed.

They passed through Nuevo Laredo some time back, heading down towards Monterrey. It wasn't like this road trip had struck him as a particularly good idea, more that it had been the *only* idea under increasingly freakish circumstances. The interstate with its mobile business class flashing back and forth in Japanese or German cars, plus the towns growing along this stretch of asphalt nurtured by the hope of it taking them elsewhere - it wasn't so different to southern Texas, the route down through Pearsall and other places time forgot. It occurred to him that he could have stopped off in Pearsall, found out if that award-winning-honey guy really *was* his dad from a different life, but it wasn't so easy facing up to this shit.

Conti had taken to rifling through the glove box. She pulled out a handful of cassette tapes, examining them like relics of a lost age, which in a sense they were.

'Vostok Lake.' She scowled at the cover, then a dubious sideways glance.

'Like you said, I don't do so good with CD or iPod or any of that.' He shrugged. It was his *entropic influence*, she told him; it wouldn't show up with basic analogue stuff such as a light switch turned on or off, but anything with chips or digital information and he was screwed.

'Give me that!' He tugged a cassette from her grasp without looking to see what it was, slotting it into the crusty old tape player mounted in the dash. Bass swelled from the speakers at back, buzzing where the cones had perished with the plucked strings of *In Between Us*. 'You like Scarface?' - he tapped out bass on the wheel. 'I'll just bet you're *all over* this shit, huh?'

Conti shuffled in her seat as though hoping to wriggle free of the music without committing herself to voice disapproval.

Good. That was the desired effect.

Todd had met her many times before, liberal as all hell, confident of no problem being so big that it couldn't be fixed providing you were white enough, and with enough middle class chops to have that one black buddy you *didn't* know just because he served you food or held a door. She showed up expecting to be appreciated, anticipating trust and admiration, which was precisely why he knew her to be full of shit.

In the absence of conversation - such as it was - the vast, silent presence of Mexico made itself felt as one more bad feeling to add to the others. The

interstate was a long thin stretch of America extruded down from the border, but a few hundred yards to either side lay a different country. This, according to Conti, was itself not unlike Todd's notional life.

Twenty four hours was a long time to spend in the company of a person with whom you shared neither common ground nor conversation, but somehow Todd had managed it. Each time this woman opened her mouth, he liked her the less.

Now they were in a place called Coatlinchan, some miles east of Mexico City, sat waiting in his car in hot sun watching the street. They had spent the night in some nowhere town along the interstate, so he could hardly blame the mood on lack of sleep; but whatever the hell they were here to do was about to be done, and then maybe he could get on with working out this whole mess; at least be away from this poisonous old witch.

He wasn't thinking straight, he knew, but had decided that under the circumstances he was probably doing okay. Maybe he would stay in Mexico if this was where his mother was to be found. It turned out he was living his life moment by moment in a literal sense, no past, no future - those he knew would already have forgotten him because he'd never had any presence they would have remembered in the first place, which explained a lot. So there wasn't much point in making plans, but right now he would do what seemed right when the best course of action presented itself, and there wasn't no good to be had from worrying over any of this shit.

Conti had the window rolled down to let in the heat. This was another one of those things he'd never noticed and which seemed weird now that he thought upon it, how Texas heat bothered everyone but him, the one guy in the whole state who never troubled with AC.

Neither of them had spoken to the other in twenty minutes when he'd gone out to buy fruit and tacos from a street seller. Conti hadn't wanted anything and he realised he hadn't yet seen her eat or drink; he couldn't *imagine* her doing either.

'I'm not the enemy, Todd.' She seemed to consider this for a second before deciding it would do well enough and fixing him with a steely eye. 'There's no reason why we shouldn't get on. I need your help and we're on the same side.'

This was the freakiest thing she'd said yet, not the detail but the tone. It sounded like a come on, although he was pretty sure that was some way

from being her intention. Maybe she wasn't used to dealing with people, at least not *human* people.

'Sure we are.' He was going to qualify his retort by pointing out that if they were really on the same team, she might at least clue him in some, but the truth was she'd told him most of it. It hadn't made a whole lot of sense, and he hadn't got much out of any retelling.

It was something to do with mythology, with native stuff, that whole other world he couldn't quite bring himself to dismiss as so much hogwash. There was a name behind this, one he hadn't quite caught and which didn't sound familiar, either some majorly big wheel or a corrupt politician - difficult to say quite which from Conti's description. The guy had done some damage to the true course of what sounded like either fate or destiny - or some other equally dumb idea - and so Todd had never been born, except of course he had, kind of...

It was bullshit, but he'd come this far, and it wasn't like he had any better ideas. Water became ice in his presence, living things slowed or stopped; friends forgot he existed, even close friends, and now *buildings* too. He had lost the right to be surprised at the sort of far fetched shit this woman was spinning him.

He finished his taco - egg and potato with a bunch of green chilli - swabbing his fingers with the tortilla before eating the last of the evidence and delighting his travelling companion with a heartfelt belch of approval. 'Yup.'

He'd expected Mexico City to be pretty much like the southside of San Antonio, but it was different. The buildings were a whole lot older, and it felt Indian in a sense he didn't recognise. Of course, his family, his neighbours, they were mostly people who'd crossed the Rio Grande. They were travelled, aware of a larger world even if they'd never been there. Down here, even with white women all over their raggedy ass billboards and Japanese goods in store windows, this did not feel like a place that had integrated willingly. He'd heard there were some towns where they hadn't even gotten around to speaking Spanish. Now *that* was hardcore.

That said, it didn't feel uncomfortable. The news was always full of the cartels and kidnappings, and no doubt it was all true, but that sort of thing always seemed worse from the other side of the fence. As they set off he had recalled a story about fake cops pulling anyone with US plates and cleaning them out, but having other shit on his mind, he hadn't dwelt on it too long. It probably helped that his car was a heap of crap. Cops excepted,

most places were okay if you kept your nose to the ground, and this was probably pretty much that way: just people getting on with their lives by whatever means suited them best.

His mom would feel at home down here, he knew for sure.

Well, his mom probably *did* feel at home down here, seeing as how she'd never left.

Todd sighed.

Nothing had passed from Conti's pursed lips in many minutes, words withheld rather than left unspoken for want of good enough reason. Finally she broke the silence.

'Look.'

Todd looked. He saw a woman, an Indian woman in a blue overall covered over with some shawl, hefting a heavy basket down the opposite side of the street: María de la Vega Lunas, the mother he never had.

5.3 (west)

Gedarra had noticed, and her face accordingly twisted to accommodate sour thoughts. 'If you are unwell, you might be wise to address the situation before we continue.'

'I am fine.' Emiousha swallowed hard, a fortification against revealing the extent of her illness, and against anger felt towards her own rebellious physiology. 'Concern yourself with that which matters the more.'

An uncomfortable silence held before the Omniscian conceded the point, closing her eyes and relaxing so as to facilitate the gestalt.

She resumed the report. 'Tisa nyeupe... Nne majivu... Tano nyeusi...'

The Kithriarch refreshed her stylus and wrote the codes as they were dictated: *Mbili manjano*, *Sita dhahabu*, then *Moja machungwa*.

Out in the Netherweald, Rhodenet and Pyrhentana were ensconced in the hogan. The last male childe had completed his work, and all that remained was to test the gestalt shared with Gedarra, the line by which their sensoria had been entangled. The Omniscian had kept herself awake many housedays as she catechised the protocols, and now, conditional to a specific sleight of mind, she was able to share in all that he experienced from the relative security of the air gallery.

He was presently dedicating his thoughts to numerals and colours in random combinations determined by Pyrhentana. Once the exercise was

done, Emiousha would compare notes with the Autodidact to determine the fidelity of the link. Gedarra was to be their eyes and ears. It would be her pleasure to relay whatever Rhodenet discovered of the universe on the other side of the flaw.

'Saba nyekundu... Tatu zambarau... Nane samawati...'

Gedarra's testimony faltered. She opened her eyes, startled, then closed them again. 'Pyrhentana is going to—' Irritation creased her face, cauterising the sentence. 'Oh the addlepate!'

'What do you see?' Emiousha sat forward. 'What transpires?'

There was no response, but it was clear that Gedarra was unimpressed by whatever was happening out in the Netherweald. The Kithriarch made to touch the childe's shoulder, an action which her better judgement stalled just in time. It was considered dangerous to disturb members of a gestalt in this way, at least whilst their concentration was given over to the remote sensoria of a partnered mind.

Setting down stylus and paper upon the counter of the cathedra, she went to the bellum notitia, raising its tasselled edge to look out. The hogan was a long way down, and now at only thirty-nine paces distance from the entrance vault, but she could see it nonetheless, a dark shape through the haze. There was a figure, which for some reason she assumed would be the Autodidact Pyrhentana, but it was not possible to make a positive identification.

Above and around, at the edge of her vision, the mist boiled with unseen nightmares, the skeletal and the feathered, the devouring, cannibal sky...

Her eyes closed, an almost emetic response, utter revulsion at the things which had encroached upon her. She had forgotten how bad it could get without the protection of blinkers. She stepped away, letting the tapestry fall back into place across the mullioned glass.

'Gedarra, please relate that which you see.' The urgency of her voice failed to elicit the desired response, and she realised the Omniscian was caught, locked in withdrawal from the gestalt, still beyond coherence. *Gedarra has been witness to something*, Emiousha realised,*something which inspires flight*. She recalled the Towering Man encountered by herself and Rhodenet two housedays previous, and the creatures of the athenæum, the hominid types and the invertebrate. These things had been brought forth with disturbing physicality.

Quickly, she crossed the floor and lifted the sack trap, descending,

taking the steps two at a time as her stride found its rhythm; down one tier to the first landing, then another, and another, a racing heart driving her on, crowding out all other concerns until she was at last stood in the vault dragging the bar back from the portcullis.

Too late she recognised the insanity of coming down here without protection, imagining she might be of some use. She fell to the pebbles, gagging upon an unborn scream, hands across her eyes to black out the circling wraiths.

'Get back inside!' The call was dry, distant, dampened by the fog but recognisable as hailing from Pyrhentana. Then the sound of footfalls slipped across the shale, approaching with haste born of panic. The childrene were unharmed.

Opening her eyes, the Kithriarch saw both Rhodenet and the Autodidact running towards her. That brief instant in which she had considered her greatest fear - that either of them could have come to harm - was forgotten as the *third* figure drove all reason from her thoughts. Seen in the single blink of an eye, that was enough. It stood, or rather hunched at less than half the height of a childe, something resembling the hominid in seated position, knees up against its chest, then cruelly bound in dirty bandages and wrappings until its features could no longer be seen. It gnashed drool flecked teeth, gibbering and writhing across the ground, moving forward with an impossible hopping motion that unsettled Emiousha's already restless gut.

Then the childrene were inside, pulling their Kithriarch back from the threshold and clapping the gate shut just as something hard and heavy slammed against its exterior.

Pyrhentana had been loomed with jet black hair, which she kept short, and a tendency to gain body mass above the standard. For some reason, with her rounded face, this gave her an appearance of permanent surprise. Leant up against the portcullis, she now seemed more startled than ever, eyes like they were ready to launch themselves from their sockets in a misguided bid for freedom.

'We saw the Towering Man, and then,' - she waved a hand, a vague gesture towards what lay outside - 'whatever *that* was.'

Rhodenet too was short of breath. He studied Emiousha for an enduring moment.

'You still say this has nothing to do with the Faction?'

She considered the monstrosity. Faction Paradox had never claimed exclusive equity on this particular aesthetic, but she presently saw little value in arguing the point.

The bellum notitia had changed, specifically an unexpected variation had introduced itself to the customary narrative. Emiousha watched traditional history unfolding, the major names of Homeworld continuity rendered in finely woven zoetic textile. She always found the gentle undulation of these images calming, and particularly appreciated the effect at this moment, puzzling revisions aside. The Yssgaroth came and went as usual, exploding in a rainbow pom-pom of yarn from a naked singularity that would in turn become the crucible from which the Great Houses knitted the structure of history; and then the monsters were beaten back, unpicked from the pattern and expunged as the caldera was sewn over. The Yssgaroth, formless creatures of nightmare to Emiousha's eye, resembled for the first time and for no adequate reason, bestial hominids; the same configuration of limbs as any childe, but naked and hairless, slavering like animals. Either the bellum notitia had finally succumbed to that force which had regressed the rest of the chapterhouse, or the continuity in which it had been woven had altered since Emiousha was last stood in this same spot. It was difficult to say which option seemed the worse.

The sack trap opened to disgorge Pyrhentana into the air gallery.

'He is prepared. All we can do is wait.'

The Kithriarch nodded cautious approval then glanced at the papers in her hand, the codes copied earlier: identical random combinations of numerals and colours. The gestalt was flawless. There was no reason why Rhodenet's great catechism should not meet with equal success.

It might be fear, she realised, particularly fear of her own elevated expectations. They had spent so long scratching and scraping, getting by like so many cave dwellers, that the thought of projecting one of their number beyond the Netherweald, mounting the kind of operation they could once have taken for granted, seemed too good to be entirely worthy of her trust.

The cathedrae were arranged in a semicircle at the far end of the air gallery, ready for the grand endeavour. Pyrhentana seated herself next to the blotchy but otherwise recovered Laethynrisa; next to Laethynrisa were Dorhira and Rothis, both - like Emiousha herself - in the initial stages of what Thraenrellis had identified as automictic parthenogenesis.

Automictic parthenogenesis: a subject the Kithriarch had earmarked for

later consideration, for *much* later consideration. Surviving the present remained the more pressing matter.

She crossed the room, allowing the huge clay figure of a Drudge to direct her to the one unoccupied cathedra - as though this were necessary.

This, she reminded herself would be the next, highest priority. Neither alive nor mechanical, Drudges comprised a basic servitor eidolon bonded to syncretic matter. If they could replace the eidolon with some of the more accessible and overtly biological codes mapped from the Netherweald, it might be possible to effect some form of interface, even perhaps to communicate.

Gedarra sat facing the others, eyes shut as she opened herself to the gestalt with Rhodenet. Emiousha, clenched a fist upon her knee for no immediately obvious reason.

The Omniscian began to speak, her speech barely more than a murmur as she channelled the thoughts and impressions of her consociate. She described that which he saw as, alone in the hogan, he opened a vein for the last time and charged his brush. The words were some way from coherence, just descriptions of sensation, a non-linear narrative folding in upon itself, uttered in a voice that resonated with the timbre of the last surviving male.

The final archemathic characters were rendered. Rhodenet's great catechism achieved critical mass, unravelling the deep structure of the flaw from the other side, the other side being the nearest point where the quintessence actually supported a structure to be unravelled.

Rhodenetmeddhoran vel-Xianthellipse fell.

Gedarra opened her eyes, blinking, staring ahead oblivious to her surroundings.

No-one spoke a word, nor made any sound. Emiousha leant forward, but before she could speak—

'It's hot and dry, but I can breath.'

The childrene, astonished and silenced, stared at the Omniscian.

'It is a world, not so different to that which we.'

The report ceased.

Moments passed. Awareness crossed Gedarra's face as she looked out from the gestalt.

The Kithriarch stood to attend her consociate. She was about to speak

when it occurred to her that the female remained interred within Rhodenet's sensoria.

The Omniscian opened her mouth and began to scream.

5.4 (south)

The woodland around Chapultepetl was green and entirely beautiful, a luxurious skirt of cedar, palm and ahuehuetl tree ranging for a great distance around the volcanic promontory for which the forest was named, a boulder large as a town and roughly carrying the form of a grasshopper. The whoops, whistles and clicks of birds, lizards and frogs filled the sun-speckled avenues between trees but Momacani found himself too anxious for an appreciation of this arboreal idyll.

Chitilma, his second for this assignment, took a pragmatic view and was in any case not the sort of fellow to be moved by places bearing the mark of Gods over those of man.

Both had adopted cotton quilted armour below their robes and carried clubs studded with obsidian blades as a precaution. This had the unfortunate effect of identifying them as something other than innocuous commoners who just happened to be passing through; but this stretch of woodland was far from populous so late in the afternoon, and neither man cared too greatly.

Tlohtoxcatl had told them *this will require your attention as a matter of great urgency*, and so here they were. Back at the Ixtilcalli, Matlacoatl had enquired as to whether the case would have been deemed quite so urgent had the Night Wind appeared in such terrible guise before some humble macehual, someone besides the personage of Lord Achicatzin. The conclusion was *possibly not*, but with the testimony of a commoner being less likely to carry so far as the ears of Motecuhzoma, it seemed unwise to give the Tlatoani any further reason to question the value of the Ixtilque given that he already held a dim view of their office. In short, their being seen to act held greater political stock than whatever those actions might yield.

The burning of Chantico's temple had set everyone to a poor mood, further emphasised by fog which left an almost tangible residue of dysphoria even once it had lifted to reveal the blue of the heavens. The supposed appearance of an omen such as the Towering Man might not ordinarily have troubled Momacani so greatly but for the unfortunate character of the day, the inauspicious Yei Malinalli or*Three Grass*, with the

Goddess Chalchihuitlicue in waiting just beyond the sunset doubtless preparing a thoroughly miserable evening for all concerned.

'These are difficult times.' Chitilma had clearly transcended his fear of stating the obvious. 'If we are not careful in our observances, the world may draw to its end in but eight days.'

'I am well aware of the great consequence of the New Fire, Chitilma. I saw Huixachtepetl.'

'Indeed, and your report does not inspire me to confidence. Let us hope that what offering is to be made will be of a value some way above the usual.'

'I am quite sure Atlazol knows what he is doing.' Momacani wished he had greater faith in his own words. Given the identity of the man now resident upon the seat and mat of Tenochtitlan it would come as no great surprise to learn that the sacrifice was to be only some Huastec captive left over after Tepeilhuitl. The Gods were most likely tired of Huastecs, and Ocotochtli had held that the sacred forces probably found those coastal people a little stringy.

Clack... clack... clack...

Both men stopped in their tracks, eyes and ears wide as flesh would allow. There was movement amongst the branches of trees and bushes up ahead - just hummingbirds.

Momacani heard only his colleague's breath, faint and cautious, and no distant clamour of a monstrous rib cage opening and closing, snapping shut. He recalled the Youaltepoztli from the painted bestiary held at the Ixtilcalli, a headless giant he hoped never to encounter.

'It may be nothing more terrible than a woodcutter about his work.'

Chitilma reiterated this proposal without much conviction. 'Of course... a woodcutter.'

They then looked around, recalling themselves as rational men and resuming their progress through the forest, setting conditionally brave feet forward.

'You recall Ocotochtli's prophecy regarding your day-sign?'

'Of late I have been given to consideration of the same.' Momacani had little idea where this could be going but a change of subject was a change of subject.

'Has this consideration covered the possibility of your beast of the city

being the Towering Man, or that tonight you are perhaps fated to fortify your fame just as your patron described?'

'No, it has not.' The Ixtilli found himself given to frowning. 'Although principally it is this matter of fate I would dispute.'

'You appear to lack faith, Momacani. I would therefore propose to you that the attributes of faith and an open mind need not be mutually exclusive.'

'Nor would I disagree, but we are all of us subject to the will of Gods, and Gods are by their nature unpredictable, so a fate that is carved in stone cannot by definition be their work.'

This silenced Chitilma, which came as a relief for Momacani knew that were he required to further clarify such a broad idea, he might soon come unstuck.

The rock loomed up ahead, framed by the trunks of cedars, a sheer wall carved out during the reign of Itzcoatl, images combining aspects of the Death God with those of Huitzilopochtli, not so much for the usual theological reasons as in a spirit of pure territorial joy. This forest had been Tecpanec land, claimed by Itzcoatl for the Threefold Alliance after the fall of Azcapotzalco.

The two Ixtilque walked up to the great rock of Chapultepetl, taking a moment to admire the relief of skeletal forms wearing sawtooth crowns - death from the northern desert.

'Dusk is closing in.' Momacani turned his face skyward to watch the sunlight scale rock at the pace of a small lizard. Darkness was a place at the edge of the physical world, a river which might be crossed by those fearful forces rooted in soil beyond noumenal understanding. Even now, across the lake, Tenochtitlan would be lighting torches and closing windows for the evening. Both men knew this, and that they were entering dangerous territory, but felt disinclined to further acknowledge the plain and regrettable fact, for this was no more than that which was required of the Ixtilque.

Momacani and Chitilma shared a moment of understanding, each offering a silent and somewhat cautious welcome to Chalchihuitlicue, the presiding Night Goddess. They were now in her care and committed to their task. Having come to the rock of Chapultepetl, they progressed towards the western side of the woodland. Their plan was that during the course of the night they should gradually cover a quarter of forest centred upon that place whereupon Lord Achicatzin had purportedly seen his

monster, thus affording themselves the chance of a similar encounter.

By the time the sun had fully set and the moon risen in its place, they had attained the western edge and were doubling back on a path running parallel to their initial route; and all this time no more than thirteen or so words had passed between the two of them. Then, as they intersected the edge of a small clearing beneath open skylight, Chitilma put a hand to the arm of his fellow so as to halt their progress.

On the far side there was some indication of movement in the tree line, maddeningly obscured by the effort of seeing over such distance with only lunar illumination. Then the figure of a macehual emerged to stand before them in the moonlight.

Both men chorused a sigh of relief for it was just a commoner, one no doubt suffering from a degree of rabbitry and given to walking off his hangover in defiance of the usual warnings about what might be abroad in the world beyond dusk. The macehual stood clad in just a loincloth, turning slowly left to right as though having lost his way. He appeared as an otherwise unremarkable sight until Momacani noticed how his shoulders ran level with the lowest branches of those trees behind.

The Ixtilli suffered an unbalanced sensation in the pit of his stomach, the same nausea experienced when looking down from a tall building, calculating that their supposed drunkard stood at more than twice the height of an ordinary person.

The Ixtilque regarded each other, thoughts scrambling to regain some sense of perspective. Their palms gripped the handles of clubs and their heads were suddenly awash with pages of the bestiary, words set down by the ancients upon how one might engage the Towering Man. *Very directly and with no sign to betray fear*, was the somewhat optimistic advice. Each drew himself a fortifying breath then, as one, surged forward into the night with brows furrowed to stone, steps determined as though they might only be on their way to give some aoompa a hard time for the sake of amusement. Of course, they were both absolutely terrified.

— If that's really what I think it is, you're going to need something a bit more impressive than big sticks and a positive attitude.

It was the voice again, and now Momacani knew for sure that it was not the work of some hidden person, for he had heard no sound beyond his own heartbeat pounding out absolute fear as the Towering Man lurched to meet them with the confidence of a predator. Amongst a crash of thoughts all beaten down in the name of defeating this monster came a further

observation.

— It looks like some sort of Mal'akh hybrid to me, although I could be wrong.

It made no more sense than anything yet arisen from this encounter and Momacani stopped up his thoughts with the enemy, this beast in the form of a man - one mystery at a time. He raised his club, facing its razor edge to the heavens ready to strike, and by no account he could figure the words of that old woman who *wasn't* his nahualli were just then returned to him.

I know she does not belong, and for some reason she has also *taken an interest in you. Personally I would not be inclined to trust her.*

So he knew the owner of the voice and had seen her in Tlalocan - Yaotl - but the realisation was cut short as the giant ploughed into him, an arm like a tree trunk bowling him aside. He saw his club flying through the air, spinning tip over tail in the moonlight. There was a scream in his ear, a battle cry as Chitilma - clearly the more fortunate of the two of them - hacked at the monster's back in the way of a flea upon the flank of a dog. There was pain and Momacani understood that he had been borne upon the air and had landed painfully, his leg beneath him as something cold and hard slammed into his side. If felt as if some part of his person had received injury, but before the matter could be considered, he was drawn, watching his own shadow extending across the ground as though its casting moon had dropped swiftly towards the horizon.

Of course the moon remained where it had been only a moment before, but now he understood the sensation that had been with him these last few days, and which had first come upon him as he sat in his boat on the waters of Lake Texcoco wondering who had spoken. The demon Yaotl was living *within* his own shadow. He was not entirely able to resolve the logic of this, but his eyes bore witness to the truth of his own dark shape swimming across the ground bearing a great thorn in its hand, a blade of some foreign design.

Cuts opened across the body of the Towering Man summoning a profound cry from its lips, something lower than hearing and at least four times as old as the world. Nocturnal wounds formed from splits in the air as some weapon made torn cloth of the night. Within moments the great body - whatever it was - lay dead and breathless, the improbable slain by the impossible.

The first manifestation resembles interlocking hoops of fire and water suspended in the air, the head of a lesser species female child floating at its centre. The Celestis are by their own admission somewhat detached, and it is no surprise that they would have no conception of that which Goralschai has done in the name of the Great Houses. They anticipate some reaction and are thus disappointed.

The second manifestation appears in a less histrionic form, excepting a hangman's noose worn around the neck. Lord Greatness-In-His-Hand is presently hominid, twice normal height with skin like oil or deep space. There is an elusive suggestion of facial features. Naturally his first question concerns the memecore.

Goralschai is surprised that the Celestis should know about this when even his own Academician remains in ignorance. The Celestis finds it interesting that he has thus far neglected to share the information with House Military given its relation to the construction of the Eleven-Day Empire. He is himself no longer entirely sure why he never handed the memecore over to his superiors. The best he can manage is that the moment did not seem right. Perhaps this suggests a failure of imagination on his part. He is himself no longer entirely sure why he never handed the memecore over to his superiors. The best he can manage is that the moment did not seem right. Perhaps this suggests a failing of imagination on his part. Perhaps, he reasons, it is because of persons like himself that the Strategists saw the need for Newblood houses.

He has no memory of coming to Mictlan, and possibly it matters only that he is now here. These Celestis, these traitors *live as fiction. Their continuity - or whatever they have instead of continuity - operates in the same way, leaping abruptly from one scene to another with only back story to account for the transition.*

He recalls his once great loathing of the Celestis. The former interventionists were those most suited to confront the enemy during the early War years, and yet they deserted the Homeworld before a shot was fired, pulling up their own history by the roots and establishing themselves in conceptual space. Their aims are inscrutable and their arrogance expressed without justification, but the Celestis are otherwise only the Great Houses without concession to humility or false modesty. Goralschai is developing an appreciation of their honesty in this respect, at least in so much as he is capable of appreciating anything.

Lord Greatness-In-His-Hand tells him that they understand each other.

Goralschai replies that he has no interest in whatever deal they may be about to offer.

A guttural noise erupts from the ebony giant, most likely laughter. He asks what deal they could possibly offer the man without desire, presumably a rhetorical question. Goralschai has not experienced desire in many years. He has been carried along by momentum alone, at least since Ganda Mnemma, moving forward along the path of least resistance, where possible avoiding his own excruciating engagement with the universe.

Mictlan appears as an epic panorama like physical pain expressed as landscape. Everything is either red or black, from buildings resembling architectural tumours to distant towers belching thick, dark smoke into a sky full of stones. Even gazing upon this nightmare he is aware only of meanings overlaid from his own thoughts. Nothing is itself, and he finds this sickening.

The lesser species would doubtless call this Hell, and Mictlan is named after just such a mythical realm as found within the lore of one of the lower races. He regards it as no better or worse than any place he has experienced.

Physical material is repulsive in the eye of the beholder, and the appearance *of physical material is repulsive in the eye of the beholder, and there is no escaping any of it. This is his burden.*

6.1 (east)

The trip from Cholula to Mexico City took around three hours but somehow felt longer. Perhaps, Primo thought, the illusion was a natural consequence of the journey. The hot, flat landscape of Cholula, then the fog and conifer forests of the eastern mountains, finally the Valley of Mexico: they would be three different countries to anyone who did not know better. Emerging from the cloud bank, the Estrella Roja coach was heading back down towards San Miguel Coatlinchan; from thin, wet air through which one could barely see the side of the road to a dry, volcanic basin which had once been the entire universe to those who lived here.

He recalled what Ultima told him.

Dusk is neither day nor night. It is somewhere on the edge, where the earth is unsettled and things may move between worlds.

Maybe this was equally true of that stretch of highway up in the clouds. The Nahua had a metaphor, *mixtitlan ayauhtitlan* - from out of the clouds, from out of the mists. This was said of those who seemed like they had come from some higher realm, those with qualities derived from sacred sources.

Another thirty minutes to go and his mind was wandering. He forced his attention back to the pages laid open in his lap, determined that they should make enough sense to at least keep his mind occupied for the next half hour.

The house was there in Tamoanchan in the west. The women lived there. Their men were killed by disease and ravaged in warfare. They were asked to sacrifice but it was not their time. 'Who are these Gods?' they ask. 'Did they give of themselves at the birth of the world? Are we truly in their debt that we should make observances such as have been requested?'

Serpent Fire showed the women a map. 'Here is where you shall go,' he says to them. They sneak off in the night. They were racoons. They went away and made no sacrifice as their mothers and fathers had asked. They were dressed in their ashes.

The Devil made his twin there in Tamoanchan. He took the loom that had been worked by the women and made his magic in that place. He fooled them. He left them on the road. They had no idea where they were. This was in the year 1-Tochtli (1506) when Moctezuma drilled fire at

Huixachtepetl.

First the man called Mactlactome Malinalli (12-Grass) came from the house firing his arrows. He came to Mexico. He goes south firing arrows and issuing his words there. He was made there in Mexico. Then came a woman but her name was not recorded. No-one knew her. She came from out of the clouds, from out of the mist.

'Well, there you go.' Primo realised he had said it out loud but luckily no-one had noticed. The coach was less than full and those other passengers he could see without having to stretch his neck had been lulled to sleep by the drone of the engine and gentle rhythm of the highway. *Serpent Fire* was probably *Fire in the Serpent*, but even assuming that to be the case, it was hardly illuminating. Also one of the dates was wrong: Motecuhzoma had postponed the New Fire Ceremony until 1507 for reasons that were probably political. Nothing had happened in 1506.

The sun was now bright, caught in dust thrown up from the road as they went into the Valley, passing unfinished single storey dwellings scattered along the edge of the fields, concrete blocks built up so far as a conceptual second storey, then left with just ribs of twisted iron to commemorate thwarted architectural ambition. They implied the labour of a giant with concentration issues, some enormous builder who was yet to complete a single job.

This was roughly what Mexico did to you if you weren't careful.

He could now see the first houses of San Buenaventura up ahead.

No way had that been thirty minutes. Perhaps something had gone wrong with time.

He tugged his bag up from between his feet and scaled to the front of the coach, pulling himself along the headrests. The driver slowed, without having once looked up, drawing to the side of the road to let him out. Primo hopped down onto the compacted earth and watched the Estrella Roja returning to the flow of traffic. There would be a pesero along any minute.

His thoughts went back to Fire in the Serpent, and then to Saint John, and then to the cave in the hillside overlooking Coatlinchan, the one he had resolved he might seek out at some point. His hand went around to his back almost of its own accord, feeling for the injury shared with someone in a dream that wasn't a dream but which refused to identify itself. The soreness was gone, scared away by the formidable Doña Ultima and her magic, and if still a little tender, at least the skin had healed over. Three doctors, albeit not particularly impressive doctors, had been unable to diagnose what was

wrong with him, and although good sense suggested that it would have cleared up even *without* his grandmother sacrificing large water birds to the salubrity of his *ihiyotl*, maybe the simple fact of its being cured was the part which mattered.

A serpent rattle drew Primo's eye to the dusty yellow earth around the pesero stand, but he could see nothing. He had imagined it, hearing sound mirages in the grinding gears of passing trucks, or else his animal spirit guide was trying to tell him something.

He sighed, once again disappointed with himself.

He bent down to pick up a leaf frond fallen from the mesquite tree struggling to breathe at the side of the road. Brown and crisp; he curled his fingers around it and held tight, willing it to rehydrate, to photosynthesise, to return from whatever afterlife existed for things that had fallen from trees. The pesero chugged up to the curb, door slipping open to accept its only passenger.

Primo scattered his pesos in the recess, took a ticket and fell back into the battered upholstery nearest the door. Villages rumbled past, and fields, then more villages throwing him from side to side as though hoping to shake out all of his most stupid thoughts, San Francisco Acuauhtla, Coatepec, and then Chicoloapan with seats filling at each stop, voices rising to drown the ranchera music, a chorus of normality rooting Primo back into the everyday.

At length he was in Coatlinchan, again at the fountain in the Zocalo and making some sort of ceremony as he stood before the River Goddess and let fingers unfold like a flower bud. The black mesquite wood contrasted with tiny feathery leaves so soft and green that it startled him. This, he decided, was definitely happening. There was no scenario in which he had gathered anything other than this lump of dead stuff, now restored in his hand. He stuffed it into his back pocket, half wishing he hadn't picked it up in the first place. He would throw it into the fountain but knew it would feel somehow like an act of pollution, like a casually discarded battery.

There was an automobile parked along Avenida Morelos as he approached, not of itself unusual but for US license plates and an uncomfortable familiarity. Primo slowed at fifty yards short of the communal door, staring at the vehicle, maroon and yet somehow intrusive. It didn't belong here in his world. Having established this much, he resumed his ordinary pace, effecting a display of indifference that these strangers could take however they wished. He would keep on walking until

he was out of sight and then reconsider his options - anything but lead them to his home - and as he arrived at this decision he immediately knew just why it was necessary. He had seen this very same vehicle before, driving through his dream down there in Tlalocan, the same action figures up front and quite obviously looking out at him. The woman was an anglo, short, dark hair and middle aged. The driver was a youngish black, somehow facially similar to himself but with a darker complexion, about his own age too.

'Screw this.' He ran, tearing along past his own door, heading for the dead end, specifically for the break in the fence he knew would allow him to lose these people who had come all of this way. Reaching the slatted wood, he let his bag slip from his shoulder, pulling it through after himself and running along towards the curve of the alley. No slamming door or revving engine indicated pursuit or any intent to head him off at the proverbial pass, but he was going to keep on until he was out of breath. For some reason this seemed important. *Trust me on this*, Saint John had told him. *You have to go along with things, let them happen.*

The alley became wheeled bins full of rotting food, then the rear door of an eating place, chilli fumes so strong that his eyes stung as he ran through the shadows from kitchen to dining area to the street outside. Cries erupted behind him, angry representatives of the catering trade resenting his brief use of their premises. He looked left and right, then ran between slow moving automobiles to the other side, into another alleyway.

'Primo, we're not your enemies. I think you should know that.' There she was, short and solid, calming hands held up to take control of an otherwise wild situation with absolute confidence. Her eyes were dark, piercing even in the half light of the alley. 'Primo Acamapichtli Isleño de la Vega, I imagine it must seem as though your world has become very complicated of late.'

This is my life, he thought bitterly. It was no surprise that this woman, this *Yaotl*, knew his full name. This was how witches worked, according to at least four generally reputable books he'd read on the subject. There was power in naming things, and certainly his own father had subscribed to that theory, for better or worse.

'My name is Lorraine,' - she paused, seemingly to assess what level of formality would be most appropriate - 'Lorraine Conti. I'm here to help you if you'll let me.'

He looked along the length of the alley, assessing whether or not he

could reasonably expect to make a break for it, bewildered as to which unstated convention had ruled out the possibility of just knocking her out and walking. Apparently she presumed to take this for a response.

'You are part of a mechanism that you couldn't possibly understand, specifically the generative component. It isn't your fault.'

He looked down, eyes tracking her shadow, visible even here in relative gloom despite the absence of a single light source. It was moving, elongating across the naked concrete at her side, waxing without concession to its owner as it raised a silhouetted pistol in his direction.

'My God.' She said this for her own benefit, sales team confidence faltering. 'You don't know...' Now she moved suddenly, with renewed conviction, arm extended like a superhero about to blast him with a ray of indeterminate properties. Her shadow remained frozen, unmoving at her side as something technological expanded in the air above, dropping from empty space - a metal carapace of liquid chrome that smelled of onions, or at least made Primo think about the smell of onions. He decided this probably wasn't his fault.

Something had happened.

It was a relative of that tall step from which one plummets in a dream, the imagined fall that shocks one from sleep; but deeper, the rift that splits open a glacier. Primo experienced a sudden and profound awareness of his world, the present, then stretching back through several thousand years of history, and all those volcanoes glowing white hot like stars in the night sky. This world was just so much skin on a pan of milk, a thin crust of rock separating the parts that moved around by the power of beating hearts from an ocean of liquid stone hotter than the midday sun.

6.2 (north)

Avenida Morelos was lined with buildings in the colonial Spanish style, pink, turquoise, aquamarine, colours so bright they throbbed like cartoons under the afternoon sun. Lorraine Conti had been gone maybe five minutes, taken off after his own brother from another universe but the same mother. He was about getting to wonder if he'd somehow imagined her and this bad episode of *The Twilight Zone* she rode in on, but being sat here in some back street in fucking *Mexico* seemed to work against that idea.

She might not return, he realised. She might forget he existed, if that was *really* how it worked, or Mexican Todd would turn out to be some hard

ass Suge Knight in a poncho and that would be that; and *maybe* it wouldn't be such a bad thing. She knew a lot for sure, but something about the woman didn't sit right. Todd was in a hole and he knew it, and whatever the hell kind of game she was playing just didn't feel like any sort of solution.

He glanced over to the street door, the one behind which his own mother lived her other life, the branch that had split from the tree before he was even born. There was no chance she could fail to recognise him, flesh of her own flesh and all. She might freak, but he bet there was a way around that. He could do it. He could do just about *anything* right now.

The street was empty, no-one around, just parked vehicles with a few pedestrians passing by at the intersection. Todd twisted his key in the ignition and started the motor, resisting the engine failure he knew was about due. Nine hundred miles had been one hell of a lot to ask from this heap of junk but it sounded fine, purring away like some old dope fiend, one of those guys hitting seventy and somehow pickled indestructible by years of substance abuse.

Easing out from the curb, he rolled down to the end of the street and took a left, falling in behind some truck laden with chickens in wood crates. He had no plan of action, no idea of what he was doing besides getting clear of that woman; but before he could acknowledge his lack of preparation as a problem, Mexican Todd stumbled out from the crowded sidewalk onto the street ahead, wide eyed and punch drunk. Lorraine Conti was nowhere in sight.

'Damn!' Todd cut off an old guy on a bicycle and threw open the passenger door, leaning down to holler at his other self. 'Let's go!'

The Mexican slid onto the seat and slammed the door, breathing rough like he'd been in a fight. He waved a helpless paw, as much as he could manage - *let's get out of here*. Todd cursed a second time, thumping the wheel as chickens blinked and clucked in their cages. The rear view mirror caught a flash of suit in the crowd just as a gap opened at the flank of the truck. Todd took it, running a gauntlet of oncoming traffic and twisting off down a side street with tires screeching a storm of spaghetti western dust and grit.

'José María Morelos.' The Mexican flapped a hand, pointing. He'd meant the name of some road. 'We need to get out of here.'

'I hear you.'

Todd slowed as they came to the next major turn having recalled that traffic cops were not an exclusively American institution. He settled back

into the seat, an awkward glance in the rear view even though there was no way she could be on their tail, unless she was a fucking *Transformer* or something. They drove on in silence, calmer with the even buzz of afternoon traffic, taking a left onto José María Morelos and heading south towards San Francisco Acuauhtla.

'I'm Todd Calavero.' It was as good an introduction as any. He crossed one hand over the other to offer it in greeting. 'I'm guessing you know how we're sort of related.'

'I saw you in Tlalocan, and Yaotl too. I did not think she would come for me.' The Mexican smiled and shook on it, a good honest grip. 'My name is Primo.'

'Yeah, she told me a little about you, that er - what you just said there...'

'Yaotl. She is a brujera, we think.'

The conversation took a moment to recover from its own surrealism, then a run up to the inevitable question. 'So what happens now?'

Unsmiling, Primo kept his eyes to the front. He'd been thinking this over. 'We go back to visit with my grandmother. I see no other choice at present.'

'Okay. I guess that works.'

'You got a cellphone I can use?'

'No, man. Sorry.' Todd had figured it wasn't really worth pointing out that Ultima was also *his* grandmother, that he knew the deal with the old woman and her chicken strangling ways; but this situation was already sufficiently fucked without getting all bent out of shape over details. Doña Ultima didn't seem like a great choice, but he had no better idea, and Mexican Todd somehow sounded like he *wasn't* just pulling this stuff out of his ass.

'There.' Primo pointed to a blue Telmex kiosk across the way, one of three bolted to a crumbling wall beside a news stand. 'I need to call,' - he'd most likely been about to say *I need to call my mother* but figured it would be awkward, like their both being only child to the same woman could bring friction. Todd checked in the rear view and span across to the curb to let the guy out. It was no big deal.

He sat there, engine ticking over, still good on a two thirds tank of gas. Primo rattled into the receiver curling a silver flex around one finger, garbled Spanish over traffic noise. Todd listened, trying to recall what language they had spoken between themselves a moment earlier. He

figured it must have been English, but that couldn't be right.

Finishing his call, Primo climbed back in, pulling the door as they moved off. 'She is well. I told her I would be back in a few more days.'

'Okay.' It sounded ambitious, but maybe this kid was in on some of the shit Lorraine Conti didn't feel like sharing; maybe he *knew*something. 'Listen, she told me how you,' - he couldn't say it - *you have powers.* Even after everything he'd experienced, it sounded corny as hell. He felt as though he was sat with Hector in the back of his mom's ride as they went over which Power Ranger could most likely hand Bruce Wayne his ass.

He took another shot at it. 'Lorraine Conti told me you have this *thing*.'

The Mexican shifted in the seat, pulling something from his back pocket. He held it up for examination, some old twig with a few leaves. It looked like mesquite and was presented as something which spoke for itself, which it sadly didn't. Todd had no idea what to make of this, and imagined Conti throwing back the hood of a cloak and telling him *the child doth have about his person an old bit of twig which be the talisman of eternity*.

'This was dead when I picked it off the ground an hour ago, and now look.' Throwing him a line, the Mexican offered the sprig of greenery for inspection. 'Don't ask how it works because I have no idea. My grandmother says I am able to breathe life into that which has passed.'

Waiting for the car ahead to turn off, Todd shifted into third then took the twig, holding it up to see. It didn't even seem like it could have spent an hour in someone's ass pocket, never mind anything else. The leaf was emerald bright and feathery. It looked fresh off the tree after a rain storm in Spring. He curled his fingers, enclosing it in his palm.

'I think you got the better deal.' He felt the change in his hand, the life within leeched away, the sharp bite of frost. 'I guess she told you about this.'

'No.' Primo sighed like it was the saddest thing in the world. 'I saw you in the car down there. I knew then we were related in some way.'

'Down where?'

'It doesn't matter.' He turned, pulling his backpack from the rear seat where it had ended up during the chaos of the great escape. Unzipping, he tugged out a battered paperback and began to flip through in search of something.

'What you got there?'

Primo began to read out loud, his voice level and school room dull. 'The twin lived in the east. He was set in the place of the one who had been sent to the north. He was placed there in the manner of the cuckoo which is a type of bird. In that place he caused things to grow, he made faces appear within people, he recovered them to life for this was a part of his essence.'

He set the book closed in his lap. 'Do you see?'

'No I ain't see. Not even a little.'

'I'm the twin, and you're the one who was sent to the north.'

Again the conversation took a break from its own surrealism and they drove on, mute but for Primo directing them to a highway that led over the mountains towards Puebla and Cholula de Rivadavia. Todd realised he was still holding the mesquite sprig. He set it upon the dash, black and crumbling. They both considered it for a moment but there was nothing to be said. Todd had thought of warning the guy that he might begin feeling more than a little funky in an hour or so, but guessed their respective powers cancelled each other out.

Powers: now there was something for which neither comics nor movies nor teenage revenge fantasies could have prepared him. Sure it was amazing, but at the same time it seemed so damn stupid. He could suck the life out of anything that moved just by being there. It didn't feel like a source of pride, maybe not so bad as admitting romantic attachments to barnyard animals, but still something that should remain hidden. Maybe that's why all those caped crusaders wore masks. They didn't even want to catch themselves in the mirror.

His mind's eye painted the cover to a comic book, himself and his cousin - or whatever Primo was supposed to be - fighting crime as avatars of life and death, the two most powerful forces of the universe. *Shut the fuck up*, he told himself, gripping the wheel just that little bit tighter.

How did life come to be this way, the noise and the simple colours and shapes of the sort of games and Hector used to play as kids?

Maybe it had *always* been like this, just he had never noticed.

Scenery overwhelmed them as they drove up into the mountains, forcing conversation, wrestling it out of them with the spectacle of the snow capped peak of Iztaccihuatl seen through the intermittent fog across plains of conifers and the greenest grass Todd ever saw. Primo told him how he had dreamed about the Aztecs, then woke up with some kind of wound same as in the dream, same as described in that book he carried

everywhere.

Ritual, the Mexican told him, *is just how you make the world do what you want it to do. You decide what all your little chess pieces mean, then you move them around, and eventually they become more real than the thing they're pretending to be. And we*, he said, *are caught up in someone else's ritual.*

Todd had a brief impression of some other person in the car with them, then the world exploded with a light brighter than any sun he had ever seen.

6.3 (west)

'What, if anything, would you say is amiss with Pyrhentana?' Emiousha gazed up into the heavy clay face, to the shadows beneath the overhang of brow where eyes would have been, but the Drudge gave no reply. Of course, even had she not removed its servitor eidolon, it still wouldn't have given a reply, but the question had been tugging at her conscience. She had hoped that spoken aloud, the words might stimulate their own explanation, some flash of inspiration that had been snagged within a dark corner of thought.

It was a foolish idea, but one that passed time. No-one was insensate to Rhodenet's death, nor to Gedarra's subsequent collapse, wired directly into the male's psyche as his entire narrative was torn to sheds by forces unknown on the far side of flaw; but Pyrhentana's reaction had been peculiar. One could be forgiven for believing that she too had directly experienced the male's destruction from within the gestalt.

None of this mattered in regard to her current task, she reminded herself. She needed to concentrate, to focus on her work. It was a problem, but one she would overcome.

She had a Drudge; she had a codex from the athenæum describing all the routines and functions of what had once been House Meddhoran's allotted quota of syncretic polymer; she had an alembic filled with a quantity of Netherweald matter. There was a way through, a means by which these things in combination would bear fruit, and all that was required was that she find it. Failure would be acceptable providing her dedication to the task had been absolute, and for now it would at least keep her from dwelling upon Rhodenet's death.

There are seven of us left, all female. The thought intruding upon her concentration was no more welcome than any of those others she presently

wished to avoid. Crossing over to the trestle, she forced eyes to the page, wilfully recalling the details of reading the eidolon, recording the symbols and binding them to the paper so as to leave the host vacant and therefore receptive. Thraenrellis might have done a better job, having made great use of syncretic polymers back on the Homeworld in the days before reckless experimentation came to be viewed as a waste of resources. The archemathics, whilst not entirely beyond the Kithriarch, were hardly her field, but then the purpose of this exercise was as much the labour as its result.

'Well met, Kithriarch.' Laethynrisa emerged from the sack trap. 'I was unable to sleep.'

Emiousha marvelled at houseday having passed over into housenight without her noticing. She absently wondered why they still bothered to observe diurnal cycles that meant nothing in the Netherweald; and there was *another* thought, how the realm maintained that constant grey in the absence of any detectable light source.

'I considered you recovered, Laethynrisa.'

'My nose bleeds frequently.' The female smiled as though this brought her some peculiar pleasure. 'Otherwise yes, I am generally recovered. I presume you are yourself quite well?'

She wasn't, and reminded of the fact she took to the cathedra drawn up next to the trestle, idly examining the codex as though her well-being required no further qualification. In truth, the pains in her stomach had become a great inconvenience, and now seated she recognised the infirmity of aching limbs. Exasperated at her own physical failings, she tried to focus upon the archemathics but found the codes too dry to hold her attention. Eager for diversion she stared up at the bellum notitia drawn across the great window, recalling the earlier, less conspicuously anthropic Yssgaroth, recalling tales of that distant era when they first intruded upon the narrative. The Homeworld had been very different back then, unformed and lacking order, something she would not have recognised.

'How is your knowledge of our past, Sophist Laethynrisa?'

The female seemed suspicious of the question. She followed her consociate's gaze to the bellum notitia, watching the writhing threads for a moment before looking back. 'I understand that history was bound to a pattern of our ancestors' design, if that is what you mean.'

'I sometimes wonder how we lived before the Anchoring of the Thread, further back.' Emiousha rubbed at a fresh cramping pain in her side but

remained otherwise stoic. 'There is so much that House Xianthellipse never saw fit to incorporate in our anamnesis. The advent of the breeding engine for example, how we advanced beyond parturition.'

'I confess mythology was never my strong point.' The Sophist drew nearer, curious glances at the Drudge and the materials scattered across the trestle. Up close, her appearance, her roseate complexion was so improved as to fool one into believing the breeding engine had resumed supplementary functions, remotely correcting childe physiology as required. 'If this is in reference to my condition, I think Ordnance-Tetrarch Goralschai would have known.'

Emiousha thought of carcinomic growth, animals giving birth to other, smaller animals, and the rationale of the man responsible for so much of their architexture. She felt repulsed. 'This atavism may only be part of the same process which has regressed the chapterhouse.'

'None of us really know the details of why House Xianthellipse seeded our bloodline, or what they hoped we would achieve.' Laethynrisa shrugged, then another smile: she didn't really care about the argument. 'I'm not sure it matters now in any case.'

Emiousha realised the childe was staring over at the trestle, specifically at her alembic. She wondered if its contents were recognised for what they were, the compound of grease and ash that had been Nuris, all that defined him abstracted leaving just Netherweald matter.

There was that noise again.

The childrene looked at each other, breath withheld.

Clack... clack... clack...

...that noise again, sounding far below, somewhere down near the entrance vault.

The Kithriarch hauled herself out of the cathedra and went aching over to the sack trap, absently aware of having taken charge and wondering if the Sophist had noticed. She set her feet awkwardly to the steps then climbed down to the next tier, Laethynrisa in her wake.

'I have heard this before, several times now.' She stood and listened.

The two of them went down another tier treading softly. As they went, a secondary sound emerged from the cover of the noise, too feeble to raise an echo, something close by. As one the childrene stopped, poised on the sixth and third steps respectively. There on the landing below, shuddering in the half light, was the wraith observed just one houseday previous. It took the

form of a seated man incapacitated by wrappings and bandages bound all around, a sickly hominid parcel with only greying, gibbering teeth showing from a darker patch, damp with drool.

The wraith rattled and shivered, subvocal babble accompanying its spastic tremors. It sounded like speech wrestled from a cut throat.

Emiousha turned, a finger to her lips imposing silence, then soft, slow steps back up towards the air gallery. Laethynrisa followed, similarly circumspect, drawn on by the obvious fact of the Kithriarch having formulated some plan of action.

Moments later, the two of them returned carrying a bellum notitia from the air gallery. This one was too small to serve as a blind and had been left rolled in a corner of the chamber. Emiousha had inspected it some housedays before. It told of some minor President, a record of his later years, a narrative that had turned garish and vulgar; of interest only to an addlepate. They came carefully down the steps in flawless accord, each with one end of the tapestry, around the corner towards the wraith.

A liquid cough burst from the bandaged obscenity, a surge of awareness and the childrene leapt down the rest of the flight, over the balustrade, throwing the tapestry across the monstrosity and wrestling it to the floor. Laethynrisa gripped tight as the mass struggled screaming and choking beneath her. She rolled, her back hitting the ingress behind, forcing it open; then braced herself, keeping her weight on two sides of the bellum notitia. Emiousha held down the third, with the fourth pinned beneath the bulk of the beast itself.

'We need a weapon!' The Kithriarch shouted to be heard, astonished at the noise of the monster, remembering even as she called out that House Meddhoran lacked even the most basic armaments. Looking beyond Laethynrisa to the open ingress of Pyrhentana's chamber, she imagined the Autodidact providing something they might use as cudgel.

Abruptly it stopped. The two childrene regarded their bundle, their captive wraith. There was neither movement nor sound, and it now seemed as though it had always been this way. Emiousha already knew this apparition to be inert matter by some intuitive means, and she stood with more concessions to her own aching limbs than to caution. Together they unfolded the tapestry, then stared at the rocks and sand crumbling at its centre.

Clack... clack... clack...

Somewhat dazed, the Kithriarch's gaze strayed into Pyrhentana's

chamber. The Autodidact sat cross legged upon her catafalque, eyes closed, lips moving to the syllables of some private litany.

Emiousha immediately recalled what had happened up in the air gallery and cursed.

Laethynrisa regarded her, curious.

She strode into the chamber, wrath lifting her voice. 'Gedarra, we have lost too many already. Whilst I commend your audacity, I find your impatience worrying.'

Entirely bewildered, the Sophist followed. 'That is not Gedarra, Kithriarch!'

There came no response and the chamber fell to silence. Then Pyrhentana began talking, her voice moderate, underscored by a second as another childe spoke through her. 'I was present when he was destroyed, and I experienced the protocols that destroyed him. It is my conviction that I will be able to navigate the flaw with ease.'

Emiousha turned and took Laethynrisa's arm, impressing upon her the urgency of the situation. 'I require that you go to Rhodenet's hogan. There you will find Gedarra. She intends to project herself out beyond the Netherweald using codes laid down by our dead consociate. You must do what you can to prevent her.'

The Sophist ran from the room, steps receding down to the entrance vault.

'Gedarra, you may succeed, but if not, it will take an age before we can catechise another childe in your place. Do not lose this opportunity by your own impatience.'

The Autodidact drew a deep breath, lost in a moment. 'This task must be done, Emiousha, now in preference to later. House Meddhoran will not endure and I am reluctant to remain and await my sequestration by some random carcinoma.'

Rhodenet, Gedarra, and *of course* Pyrhentana, all loomed from the same cognitive voidwork. Emiousha wondered why it had not occurred to her that the third childe might engage with the gestalt, and more significantly, why they had elected to keep it from her. 'House Meddhoran—'

'We are dying, my Kithriarch. We no longer enjoy the luxury of treading with care.'

Pyrhentana opened her eyes, blinking.

'She is gone.'

6.4 (south)

The way ahead through the forest of Chapultepetl was clear, but Momacani felt nevertheless flustered, as though obliged to further assure everyone that this was indeed the proper path. Doubt radiated from his companions like warmth from the hearth fire - Chitilma excepted - and it was itself an act of courage to meet Tlohtoxcatl's eye, although this was perhaps only a subsidiary effect of the ancient priest's face paint. It gave him a flinty look, hard, the piercing gaze of one who saw very clearly. The most basic truism amongst the group was that Tlohtoxcatl, if severe, was a good man with the strongest of hearts, and so it pained Momacani to find himself subject to the elder's distrust for the first time in his life. Worse, he now knew himself to be tainted by the sacred for certain, specifically the vile spirit of Yaotl. This was how his life was to be from this point on, stumbling from one hapless indiscretion to the next. He was beginning to wish he had never mentioned the Mocolxiutecatl, or made so testy a defence of his memory of that day.

'I see you recall very well, my friend.' Apparently amused, Tlohtoxcatl continued. 'We each of us have similar stories I am sure, and so we can only hope that sense will be made of them when it is right that we should understand.'

'I suspect my Lord refers to the exile of Yauhtloc.' Chitilma grinned with a surfeit of enthusiasm in the way of a child hoping to please its master with casual flattery.

The priest deflated the outspoken Ixtilli with a dark look, then grudgingly relented. 'A man who is unable to tell the difference between a foreigner, albeit one of such singular appearance, and a visitation of the sacred can have no claim to wisdom of any form. The world does not work by such a mechanism. Simply because we have not found the answer to a puzzle, it does not mean that no such answer exists.'

Matlacoatl's voice warbled aloft from the rear of the group. 'Who was this Yauhtloc?'

The aged priest allowed Chitilma to help him across a small stream then waved a hand in dismissive manner. 'There are many of these stories, any one of them much like another: the war that goes on in some place above the highest heaven, the Ayahueltecs of Ayahueltlan and their like. It is good to set these curiosities down, but until sense can be gleaned they are

only childish tales for all the difference it makes.'

The argument arose when Tlohtoxcatl had insisted upon being taken to view the corpse of the Towering Man, or at least the site where the corpse had lain, its body being too large to bring into Tenochtitlan without detection by those less well-informed members of the Court who had no need to know of such mysteries. The body, so the priest insisted, must belong to some unusually tall person, possibly a foreigner, perhaps even one of those elusive Quiname people; *unless* it should genuinely be an avatar of Tezcatlipoca, which could only be proven by its post-mortem disappearance. Hence if they failed to find the corpse, then it could only have been the real thing.

'Perhaps the Ixomitectin might be some as yet undiscovered aspect of the Death God.'

All eyes turned to Chitilma, wondering as one why he should have fixated upon this of all mysteries. As the only one of their number who had borne witness to the Ixomitectin, albeit briefly, Momacani was moved to a sarcastic rebuttal but decided against it. He considered the subject uncomfortable, particularly in respect to events of the previous evening. There was, he felt, some connection: spirits living within shadows or wearing them in the manner of a robe...

The other tales - he knew of them but had not considered their like in some time. Possibly this was the root of that which had been troubling him: he understood a few kernels of strange truths, but the Ixomitectin were real, which begged the question of what *other*wonders might also be considered kin to daily life whilst masking themselves as fiction. He might deal with one riddle at a time, but the fullness of a world that encompassed all such mysteries seemed too terrible to contemplate. It could perhaps be considered a great mercy that the Gods, in breathing life into the raw clay of humanity, had seen fit that no man or woman should ever witness much more than their own small corner of creation; no man or woman apparently except for himself.

Before Chitilma could receive a response to his observation, they had arrived at the clearing, emerging into morning sunlight from beneath the cover of the trees. Today was Nahui Acatl or *Four Reed*, traditionally a good day in divinatory terms, but a day given over to the care of Itzlacoliuhqui and one which therefore might still go either way, Momacani had decided.

The body of the Towering Man lay where it had been slain. Knights had

been posted at dawn, charged with keeping away curious commoners whilst being themselves forbidden to get so close as to view that which they were to deny all but members of the Ixtilque. They had done their job well, allowing that their job had not extended to the exclusion of hungry racoons or buzzards.

The Ixtilque now picked over the corpse, stepping across limbs as though they were fallen trees. Only Momacani remained at a distance, conspicuously aware of the need to avoid further exposing himself to sacred matter. Instead he watched the others, noting that even the old priest was reduced to astonished silence. His eyes met briefly with those of Chitilma, and again he made to discern whether there was some new understanding between them, or whether his colleague had drawn no conclusion regarding the invisible knight and slayer of their foe.

'Perhaps I have been hasty.' Tlohtoxcatl settled upon a low boulder, his voice lacking its previously confident cadence. The old man stared at the dead monster, his men clambering across its great bulk like yearling children at play in the presence of a snoozing elder. This struck Momacani as one of the strangest sights he had yet seen, somehow so matter of fact and of such small issue - grown men sporting around the body of this nightmarish personage in broad daylight. This could not be how the world was intended to work. The sacred had customarily worn some form of mask, which prompted the fearful notion that Gods might no longer trouble themselves to move in such mysterious ways when consequences no longer mattered.

Seven days left to the New Fire Ceremony, to the grand act of sacrifice which would renew the universe and ensure the continuation of time; perhaps those resident in the realms beyond had already looked ahead to the future and seen only a void.

The voice - Yaotl - had been silent since the previous evening, but Momacani felt certain that she was still there, her presence revealed in an unwavering sensation of being watched. He had a hunch that she may be taking stock, even that she could be angry about something, although naturally it was quite impossible to identify the means by which he could have received such an impression.

Matlacoatl had taken to engaging the old priest in some discussion.

'Even as relics any part we might salvage could prove dangerous, and I do not think we can expect people to believe us when we tell them this encounter was borne from swamp gas.'

'Then we will simply have to bury it, I suppose.' Tlohtoxcatl now had the hunched poise of a man defeated, one who has seen all the meat fall from his tortilla. His dark eyes passed briefly towards Momacani, heavy with suspicions he was evidently not yet ready to voice.

The tension birthed in this single glance - or more correctly the anxiety Momacani suffered as a result - endured until the group were back in the city much later that day. The elder priest vanished into some dark quarter of the Calmecac building ostensibly to confer with colleagues but most likely in search of a fortifying drink, whilst Momacani made for one of the minor temples dedicated to Tezcatlipoca.

As an Ixtilli he was entitled to make offerings at the primary shrine of the Smoking Mirror in the main square of the city, but that day there had been some troublesome occurrence in the ceremonial courtyard centred upon the temples of Centeotl and Xilonen, amongst other harvest Deities. His time was so limited as to deny any detailed understanding of the situation, but the main theme was spun from a rumour of the city granaries being close to depleted. He recalled the arrogant young official he encountered at Huixachtepetl, the assurance that there was no danger of a food shortage. Patently those commoners massed in the square, crowding up the steps to the shrines only to find themselves beaten back by jaguar knights had taken a different view.

This was Ce Tochtli, a famine year in ritual terms, and here was the habitually sensible Momacani set against the views of the traditionally more superstitious incumbent administration. Ordinarily it was Xocoyotzin finding his premonition of war with a tribe of intelligent ducks from studying the turds of an orphan child as the Ixtilque stood by, muttering under their breath about reason and its like. Somehow the order was upset. The world had ceased to be consistent.

Ascending thirteen steps to a modest temple shrine, he went into the darkened interior, assured by those on duty that he would not be disturbed. Next he positioned the burners just so, selected a vessel and thorns from where they were provided at the entrance, and then began.

His first move was to pierce himself, then as sweat beaded upon his forehead and he steeled himself against the pain, he drew a length of knotted grass slowly through his flesh, burning and bleeding each time the weave of the material further opened the wound.

It was excruciating, which was of course the point.

His mind became a place of brilliant white, scorched free of thought by

raw pain, the smoke of copal incense scratching at his lungs. *You will answer this time*, he said to himself.

— It seems I am unable to refuse. I didn't think you could do that.

The pain was greater than any moment of personal triumph, or anything approaching fear. He demanded that she reveal to him her identity, her *true* identity.

— Cihuatecuhtli Hueyhueycuauhtliocelotlalayotl, although I dread to imagine how that must sound in Nahuatl. I think you'd better stick with just Yaotl. There was a pause. ***You do appreciate, I take it, that I'm on your side.***

Momacani cried out in spite of himself as another knot broke through the wound splitting new flesh. Blood dripped into the bowl, approaching a trickle. He formulated another question.

— Let's just say there was a vacancy, an empty seat if you will. I decided to climb aboard and see where it might lead; and here we are.

The Ixtilli reflected upon the Toltecs, and upon Huemac destroyed by the sorcery of this monster. He envisioned the last days of Tollan as he had seen them in the painted books; and surprised himself at his increasingly ordered thoughts - a song attaining harmony against the wall of pain surging up his body from below.

— Your culture is changing, Momacani. The laws of the universe are changing. Your little world will soon be the only show in town if this continues. Do you understand?

All he had seen since that day when the most honoured Lord Ahuizotl spoke with him, and more recently the avatar of Tezcatlipoca, and that Xochimilcan fool who may even have been telling the truth: he understood that constant exposure to the sacred took its toll, and indeed he had *always* understood this even whilst giving it little thought. The corrupting ixihtec of higher powers had become imprinted upon him as though in flying too close to the sun he had himself become its terrible heat. This, he now knew, was how Yaotl had found him.

He was tainted, and he would never be clean.

6.5

Two men are sat upon a rock at the side of a mountain. The land has the texture of bone and a lake is burning in the valley below, crude black water

licked by flame. The wind howls like penitents, although there are none to be seen.

Water Sun is a lesser species human indentured and personally claimed for Mictlan by Lord Greatness-In-His-Hand. His body is ravaged with age, his long hair turned grey and his face knotted with bronze wrinkles. Dressed in only a cloth and sandals, he appears the archetypal primitive and his testimony is hardly illuminating. He tells Goralschai that they are not really in Mictlan, but rather a realm bearing its name. He does not understand the Celestis although he refers to them as demons. Mictlan, he says, is cold, damp, and above all a dull place.

Goralschai tells the creature that he has understood.

Water Sun tends to repeat himself a great deal. He talks about planting willows and squashes and maize; and about hunting fish and water birds; and about devotions to those who once blessed his hunt, Lords named Amimitl and Atlaua. He understands the deal by which he was brought to Mictlan, but not what the Celestis have gained by his presence.

Goralschai believes the man is looking for reasons where there may be none. Beyond self-preservation, the Celestis do not appear to have coherent goals, and certainly nothing on a political scale. In a hope of silencing Water Sun, he tells the human that they were most likely brought here because the Lords of Mictlan find the idea amusing. He explains that the realm is a fiction, and only a fiction, something more resembling a story than anything geological in terms of structure. They perceive it as real having been drawn into the story.

Far from silenced, Water Sun spends some time rephrasing the explanation in his own words, although it seems he is thinking aloud. His analysis is that the Celestis require that their story should be read in order that they should live, and that without an audience they are nothing, which must account for why they appear as they do so as to make the strongest and most dramatic impression.

They are sorcerers*, he says.* They cause false faces to appear within themselves. They should be ashamed. *An unpleasant gargling sound resonates in Water Sun's throat and he spits, his disgust made quite clear. The gobbet of saliva sizzles and turns to steam as it hits the osseous rock, which is nonsensical given that the ground beneath them feels only moderately warm. At this point Water Sun announces that he does not consider the Celestis to be Gods but instead regards them as some other sport of the sacred. Gods, he claims, would not appear as they do in such a*

rude and obvious manner because the world does not work by such means with its mysteries so clearly paraded for all to see.

Goralschai has spent the duration of the monologue considering whether he should walk away, but he has already heard the words and this fact would remain unchanged in a different location. Furthermore he is presently convinced that solitude might prove less easily endured. The chattering ape at least provides a point of focus beyond that of his own thoughts, and - paradoxically - a point of focus beyond his own perception of Water Sun's thesis upon the habits of the Celestis in their natural environment. In addition, his removing himself will most likely inspire the curiosity and thus further draw the attention of former interventionists.

It occurs to him that he has no idea why he is here. Unlike Water Sun, he has brokered no deal with these creatures. He might leave at any time, and although he has made no efforts towards discovering the means by which he was brought here, he has no reason to suppose a request for release would be denied; leaving only the question of what would be the point.

7.1 (east)

He recalled a funny story, or at least one that he himself found amusing. It had made him laugh when he first read it in Durán's *Historia*. Maybe you had to be there; but maybe Primo was.

Back when the Mexica had been vassals, just the shock troops of the Tecpanec state, Tezozomoc demanded tribute. This was not unusual, in fact it was the oil that greased the proverbial wheels of Mexican politics back then; although when it came to Acamapichtli's people, the Tecpanec ruler's demands were so eccentric as to be considered provocation. He was pushing them, seeing if they would bite, perhaps even looking for an excuse to rid himself of these troublesome northern savages once and for all. So he asked that they deliver to him a great raft laden with squashes and other good things, even planted with trees. This was to be sailed into Azcapotzalco harbour on the day of due payment, and they had just one ilhuitl - a festival period of twenty days - to achieve this.

It wasn't easy, but Acamapichtli was proving an inspiration to his people, and on the due day the raft sailed into the harbour at Azcapotzalco on the western shore just as required. Tezozomoc may not have been pleased, but he didn't show it, instead demanding that the *next* burden of tribute would be an identical raft, additionally laden with ducks, herons, egrets and other water birds, all sitting upon clutches of eggs. This was to be submitted upon the last day of the next ilhuitl, and the eggs were to hatch at the precise moment of the raft arriving in the harbour.

Twenty days passed and the warriors of Azcapotzalco chipped their swords and clubs to sharpen the blades, ready to wipe these Mexica from the face of history. The ilhuitl came to an end, and there was the latest tribute offering, delivered on time and in full to Azcapotzalco, a chorus of tweeting chicks and ducklings breaking out as they sailed into the dock. Historians later viewed this as either exaggeration or metaphor, sixteenth century Nahua attestants playing up the magical prowess and esteem of their forebears, emphasising Acamapichtli's status as the great founder, the progenitor of an entire way of life described by a wealth of fertility symbols, a man with the*ixihtec* of a God. History, for the Nahua, was fluid, a means of explaining the present.

The problem was that Primo could remember some of these events as though he'd been there. Perhaps he *had* been there, stood upon the dock at

Azcapotzalco, sweating as Tezozomoc watched the raft punted towards him by attendants. There was a word for it, *anamnesis*- that which the soul may learn *prior* to birth. Maybe there was also a word for being able to remember things that probably hadn't happened, or that had only happened as metaphors.

The thoughts spiralled, bringing him back to Todd and the highway, the explosion.

He opened his eyes, cold, damp and grey like Mictlan, the Realm of the Fleshless, the miserable afterlife found at the northern limit of the underworld. Doña Ultima had warned him about coming to this place.

Face down in wet grass about ten feet away, the body groaned and Primo recalled the explosion for a second time. Everything drifted away. He was in shock, he realised. They were at the side of the highway, in a field probably a few kilometres out of Río Frío de Juárez. The ruins of the automobile lay all around, scraps of twisted aluminium rusting over, engine parts crusted with dried oil and grime like the explosion had done its damage many years ago. It was clearly the same automobile, as was obvious from paintwork flaking beneath weedy trails of the ololiuhqui vine. Primo decided that there probably wasn't much stock in being surprised by this.

He pushed himself up. It felt like he'd gone ten rounds with el Rey Mysterio, aching all over as his strength returned. He stood without too wild a display of confidence, surveying the damage.

This really *was* like the underworld, traffic noise dying in the thick fog, the ancient ruins of a Precolombian automobile poking up from the ground like the teeth of a buried giant. He could see that Todd was breathing, and then he noticed the woman.

They were in the automobile, driving.

There was a blinding light.

There was someone else in the automobile.

He stepped over, leaving deep prints in the sodden grass. She lay on her back, eyes closed. Her hair was short, roughly blonde and a little untidy, just grown rather than an actual cut of any kind, oddly childlike; her face was angular, and it seemed like she would be quite tall. Her clothing was peculiar, red and gold resembling something from an historical drama, something colonial; but the strangest thing was that, without any single point that could betray her as being anything other than human, it was

absolutely clear that she wasn't. Primo did not know why he should hold this conviction, only that it was solid and unshakeable, and this was another thing for which he could not summon surprise. She was from somewhere else, and now she was here.

She opened her eyes, stared at him and sat up.

'Hello.' Primo decided it was as good an introduction as any under the circumstances.

'I am Gedarrameddhoran vel-Xianthellipse.' She looked around, apparently considering this explanation enough. 'Gedarra is acceptable as a form of address.'

'Okay.' He shrugged and wondered what language she was speaking. He understood her fine but for some reason the words sounded unfamiliar. Whatever she was, she didn't belong here. He recalled the wheezing woman on the coach to Cholula, the one who said that Our Lady had appeared before her cousin somewhere up here. Then he recalled the clamour as he had alighted in Cholula, passengers gathering around and thanking the Virgin as the old woman drew deep sturdy breaths into capacious lungs. Strange that he should recall this detail only now.

'Where are we?' Gedarra was getting to her feet, looking around, confused glances at the ground as though she had never before encountered wet grass. 'This is not the Netherweald?'

A second low groan came from Todd. Primo went over, quick steps as he realised that against all odds he was himself now entirely recovered despite having been blown up in an explosion of such force as to blast the ruined automobile back through time and drop some mountain spirit on their heads. He ducked down to examine Todd, wondering if he would recognise the angle of a broken bone. There was no blood to be seen. Nothing seemed too bad, at least nothing aside from the guy being unconscious.

He took a shoulder and rolled him onto his back, recalling too late that this probably wasn't such a good idea as another long, low groan emerged in support of *not moving the body until properly trained medical staff have arrived at the scene of the accident*. He looked over at costume drama woman and decided she probably didn't have a phone, which was annoying.

'Is this Earth?' She named the planet in terms of it being a place she had never before visited. This was somehow a bit thick even for Primo, and he laughed in spite of himself.

'This is Mount Tlaloc.' He pointed roughly east, or what he imagined to be east. 'Río Frío de Juárez is about twenty minutes that way, I'd say. We're in Mexico, you know?'

Maybe that was too much like stating the obvious, but then maybe not. Maybe space creatures really did say things like *take me to your leader* and *we come in peace*. Someone needed to write a guide book to cover this sort of thing.

Todd's respiration seemed steady and his eyes were open a little. He was conscious. It was at this point that Primo noticed how all of the plant matter around the American was rotted, black and frosted over in places. They were a little way from the road, far enough for traffic to be seen only as lights struggling through the oceanic grey. They might have been here for hours. His watch had stopped, so he pulled the cuff of Todd's sleeve back from the wrist, but the American wasn't wearing one, and considering the other option, it seemed like a safe bet that a person who had to ask what planet they were on probably wouldn't be able to tell him the time.

'You're going to be okay, man.'

Like he really knew *that* for sure, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

'It still isn't working.' Gedarra had her arm held out straight, exactly like Yaotl back in Coatlinchan when she had done whatever it was she had done. 'My remora isn't working.'

She was talking to someone else, someone other than Primo. Maybe she had the equivalent of a phone implanted in her brain.

'Oh wonderful. That's all we need,' - an unfamiliar voice, deep and sharp.

Primo looked up. A stocky silhouette had emerged from the mist, an officious gait and a skirt. It was the Yaotl, Lorraine Conti. She glared at Gedarra as though burdened with a great weight: here was some new complication she would be expected to address.

Gedarra meanwhile stood rooted to the spot, clearly unsure of how to proceed. The look upon her face suggested perhaps not foreknowledge, but at least an understanding of what this woman represented. This was very much to her credit so far as Primo was concerned.

Instinct drove him to flight, but he fought it and shook Todd in the hope of rousing him. 'Wake up, man. We need to move.'

Todd was far from recovered. He turned his head and murmured

something, a single syllable.

'You do appreciate that I'm actually on *your* side?' Yaotl came forward to stand over the American in proprietorial fashion. 'You surely understand at least something of what *he's* doing?'

Someone else was coming, emerging from the fog behind the woman. Then Primo realised it was her shadow, independent movement just as it had been back in Coatlinchan. His grandmother had named this woman *Yaotl* and he was beginning to see why. Yaotl was amongst the darker aspects of Tezcatlipoca, the *Enemy on Both Sides*, the killing breath of night.

His instincts renewed their efforts and this time Primo listened, stepping back, edging towards the mountain sprite, the visitor, Miss Roswell 2012 or whatever she was supposed to be. Yaotl's shadow had been visible even in the absence of light in a dark alley, so it was logical that it should stand unaided in the fog and mist. It raised an arm.

There was no sound although clearly there should have been, a cinematic shot implied by the shape of pistol held in the hand of the shadow, by the jerk of its arm. Maybe Primo *had* heard a shot because certainly his skipping heart had that impression; he just hadn't heard it as sound.

Gedarra reached for him. 'It would be a good idea for us to get away from this female.'

He wasn't inclined to argue. Within moments they were running, incautious in the long grass and tearing through the mist, lungs straining in the thin air of the mountains. Yaotl called after them but the words reduced to noise: she was angry and she was here as a big favour and would have appreciated some assistance. This was the general thrust of her argument so far as Primo could tell. Whoever she was, whatever sorcery she had at her disposal, happily she was clearly no athlete.

They ran for many minutes until his lungs demanded they stop.

They stood, staring out into the fog, panting and gasping as quietly as possible and listening out for anything that would indicate pursuit.

They heard nothing, not even the noise of the traffic.

7.2 (north)

'I know there's something wrong. You need to tell me what that is.'

Selena dipped her head towards him, that slightly boss-eyed interrogation face picked up from *Springer*. She wasn't mad, just driven. 'It was something at JMB, wasn't it? Someone said something to you.'

'Ain't nothing happen at JMB, baby.' Todd swiped the remote at the plasma screen, muting KSAT news and another overplayed warning for a hurricane that would most likely amount to a breeze and five raindrops. 'You need to relax some.'

She examined him, unconvinced, whisking up eggs in a Pyrex jug. Her husband had this way of defusing one hard word with another thrown right back, and she'd never quite got to the stage of thinking past this counter move. She'd let it rest for now, maybe return to it later if the moment was right, if whatever was bothering Todd was still bothering him on a full stomach.

He brought the sound back and watched as a reporter stood windswept before some downtown corporate headquarters, a gleaming pyramid of glass and steel. Something *was* bothering Todd but he had no word for it. He'd thought it over and over and so far only been able to conclude that the previous couple of months hadn't happened; neither had they been a dream, something he'd experienced whilst in a coma or under anaesthetic, *or* a different reality where María de la Vega Lunas gave birth to his sort-of-brother in Mexico City and never made her way across the Rio Grande into the United States. Wherever he'd been all that time, those weeks hadn't happened, and if they*had* happened, then it wasn't in the sense that Selena pouring eggs into the skillet just now had happened.

This was presently as much as he knew.

Plainly there was more, but none of it added to an even number, so it didn't seem like there was much good to be had in thinking on it.

'What's up with Justin?' Selena never had too much trouble making herself heard, so her voice carried well enough from the kitchen over the noise of plates, fridge, microwave and so on.

'I couldn't say, baby.'

Now she was back at the skillet, flipping and scraping. 'Your boy didn't tell you nothing?'

'Well I'm guessing he's saving it up for when he come over. Can't see how we'd wanna say it all on the damn phone and ain't have nothing to talk on later.'

She sliced and flipped, cursing as the microwave pinged with her

already doing three other things at once. 'When you going to deal with that tree, Todd?'

'I'm going to deal with that tree tomorrow, just like I told you.' He knew she was trying for some weak spot. He was accustomed to this and it didn't trouble him any. It simply meant that she was concerned, and of course she had good reason even if he didn't exactly know what that might be.

'Well, there's the hurricane—'

'Baby, every time someone passes gas east of Galveston some fool calls it a hurricane. The tree will still be there in the morning, and seeing as I won't be working on account of it being a Saturday, I'll deal with it.'

'I'm worried about the power line is all.' She came in, two plates with a bottle of Cholula sauce held in the crook of her arm. Her gaze was drawn to the television.

'I know.' Todd took his plate. 'There really ain't no need.'

She set it all down on the table in front of the couch, jerked out some hot sauce onto one of her tacos and then rolled it up, taking a huge bite. They ate in silence watching the rest of the news, just local stuff - fussing and bitching over the hurricane that wasn't, then the military situation - *everybody* wanted those troops home. There was some footage of course, most likely from a cellphone, jaybird naked insurgents all crusty and shit with those wild headdresses and Russian assault rifles, jabbering protests for viewers at home, none of whom understood so much as a word of their language. Primo would have known what was being said, but of course Primo hadn't been born.

Finishing up, Todd and Selena licked their fingers like a couple of house cats.

'Thank you, baby.' He stood, taking both plates to the kitchen. 'That was some good food.'

'I think that's Justin.' Drawn by the sound of an engine, she raised herself from the couch and crossed over to part the blinds. 'Yeah, he's here.'

Todd filled the sink with hot water, listening as Selena let in his friend. He added dish washing liquid and worked up some suds, scrubbing the plates with a scouring pad and setting each onto the drying rack as he stared from the window.

Evening had fallen and it was dark outside, too dark to see the tree. He recalled visits from phone and electric companies, hooking everything up when first they had moved here. These utilities were quite naturally all

above ground, piped in by cable and so at the mercy of Texan trees with their sprawling branches. He tried to remember which line was presently pinned by the dead, sagging limb of the mesquite. The last time this happened they lost their internet connection, but he'd checked and it didn't seem like the job couldn't wait until morning.

Justin came through, awkward, somehow too big for the kitchen. 'How you doing, man?'

'I'm good. Just about done here.'

Draining the sink, he dried his hands on the dish cloth and patted his pants pocket for keys and money. The two of them passed back through the front room.

'Don't wait up.'

By now Selena was deep into *Big Brother*, just managing a nod to show that she'd heard as Hunter dished dirt on Kimberley in the diary room. Todd opened the door and cursed as the wall of heat washed over him, sweat gathering upon his brow before he was half way across the yard to his friend's ride. 'So where we going?'

Justin shrugged and climbed in. 'We need to pick up Andre.'

'Sure.' Todd got in, closing the door quickly as possible while Justin started her up and turned up the AC, a blast of cool air rushing out from the dash. 'It was a hundred and five today, you know that?'

'Fuck Texas, man.' Justin laughed, looking back across one shoulder as they screeched out onto the road. 'Soon as I get a say, I'm getting posted someplace where they have winter.'

Todd took a second to chew on this. 'You got your papers?'

'I'm gonna be all I can be.' Justin laughed and began playing around with the music system: Scarface naturally, a slow bass pounding beneath the rear seat like some force of nature, movie soundtrack menace taking its time.

There was that point people always missed with this music: sometimes life didn't seem quite such a raw deal when you accepted it as just a movie, just some story. Todd watched Justin moving his lips to about half the words, making the screw face, and wondered which movie*he* was living in; most likely some dumb inspirational shit, grown men weeping for the joy of getting asses blown off like it made a difference, some old Colonel with a single tear in the corner of his eye indicting anyone who didn't feel like running off to get killed as unpatriotic.

Maybe Justin had *always* been that way and Todd had never noticed. He followed the thought down the rabbit hole of his own private southside before he could stop himself, that old Chevy Caprice Classic he'd neither owned nor driven, Justin getting a ride that one day, sat there shivering like a fucking popsicle.

Here he was, the only guy in Texas who saw air conditioning as a lifestyle choice. It wasn't even like it was too soon to consider this stuff, more that it was some bullshit, plain and simple. It made no sense. It was no more real than an episode of *The Other Side of the World*.

'You got shit on your mind, I guess.' Justin cracked a toothy smile.

They were already on Broadway, turning off towards Andre's place. Todd took a moment to catch up, to acclimate to being with another person. Fifteen minutes had slipped by and he felt out of place. He thought of a diver coming too quickly to the surface from ocean depths. There was a word for it, one that escaped him.

'So where they gonna send you?'

Justin required no elaboration, which made sense because it wasn't like he had much else going on right now. 'I figure it's gonna be Natchitoches. That's where they say the next big push is gonna go through.'

'Natchitoches.' Todd scrunched his face, squeezing out a memory. 'That's Oklahoma, right?'

'Louisiana.'

'Well, that's good.' He tried to sound at least a little as though he meant it.

'Not if you don't like swamps.'

Todd could have pointed out that just because it was Louisiana, it didn't follow that Justin would be posted to a swamp, but kept quiet on the grounds of not really knowing this for certain, *and* that they had just pulled up outside Andre's place.

Andre, presently bounding down the drive like a big happy dog, was the *after* photo to Justin's *before*, physically and now in terms of career path too, his having just this month come back from his first tour of duty. He had that same undecided complexion like his ancestors were from different lands depending on what time of day you asked, Samoan before 10AM, then Mexican up to lunch time. As always he was robust, almost *too* happy. Todd hadn't known the guy before but doubted this could be the result of military service.

He glanced at Justin and tried to imagine *him* returning from his first tour of duty with the personality of Bugs Bunny. It wasn't happening.

They drove back onto Broadway and headed for downtown, laughing some but not really saying a whole lot. They talked mainly so as to establish the fact that they were talking, then of course Justin got back onto Louisiana and how it was going to be.

There wasn't a lot that Todd could add, so he listened as the glass pyramids of the oldest part of San Antonio grew from the horizon, gleaming in the night, the colonial heart around which two million people were presently sprawled. He thought of the *really* old buildings further south, stuff still buried in the jungle and accessible only by burro and some toothless old guy who wanted to rape you. They weren't really buildings as such, more like platforms, ceremonial reconstructions of the mountains from which all good things were derived, not least corn and rainfall. It didn't really make sense why they were still building in that same shape, like Bank of America really needed a place where they could sacrifice a virgin every once in a while.

He wondered if this was one of the things he'd decided not to think about in too much detail.

'So what's up with Wichita?' You could tell Justin was taking notes in the event of his *not* ending up in the Bayou living off of McGumbo meals.

Andre shrugged.

7.3 (west)

The sack trap opened at the centre of the air gallery to dispense a significantly aged female wearing a flowing peignoir of black and grey vinyl, a wild and somewhat reckless garment presenting an odd contrast with her intensely sculpted hair. This was the Biblarian Dorhira, and her elder appearance, much like that of the recently deceased Insoleanis, was merely an affectation of her looming. She was in fact the youngest of the seven surviving childrene.

Thraenrellis, Rothis, and Laethynrisa were arranged in a semicircle about Pyrhentana, and Dorhira now joined the group, laying claim to a cathedra with her stylus and paper set upon its counter. They had gathered for the purpose of taking notes, infrequently scratching away as the Autodidact spoke in a voice belonging as much to the absent Gedarra as to herself.

Emiousha listened in as she laboured, offering no comment. She had yet to decide what to make of Gedarra's transference, and presently concentrated on her work with the Drudge. The others could take notes if they so wished, although she was less than optimistic about the value of the exercise. Whilst overjoyed that Gedarra had survived and was apparently thriving over there on the slopes of this*Mount Tlaloc*, of the original fifteen childrene loomed to the catacomb of House Meddhoran, six remained, one was absconded and the rest had perished. Reckless displays of hope were not going to undo the damage that had been wrought. Until the Omniscian found some sort of magic rope that could be threaded back through the flaw so as to pull them all to safety, her testimony would remain at best a diversion.

The dark patch of ash and grease had begun to integrate with the smooth, grey epidermis of the Drudge. The Kithriarch raised her brush, conscientiously inscribing archemathic characters upon the area. The catechism had not been anywhere near so complex as anticipated, and whilst this did not exactly raise her mood, she took satisfaction from the fact. It was a mercy that these servitors remained unaffected by either blight or regression - assuming the two were distinct phenomena - being neither alive nor mechanical.

The childrene chattered amongst themselves, a second wind of excitement now that they had brought Dorhira up to date with all that was happening to Gedarra. Her new found world had turned out to be the same planet, even the same obscure principality which had once observed Nemontemi - the *Nameless Days*, the conceptual interlude to which House Meddhoran would have absconded had the Ordnance-Tetrarch been true to his word. Only the timing was out with Nemontemi reduced to a dead tradition, so Gedarra had discovered. The planet had nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, standard gravity, and hominid life of the traditional kind. This much they related as Pyrhentana resumed her consociate's narrative, channelling the gestalt.

'I have now encountered three of these creatures. I am still with the first one, the male identified as Primo.' A shadow crossed the Autodidact's face as though confronted by something beyond description. 'There were two, both males whom I sense are entangled within our own situation by means I do not yet fully understand.'

The childrene had fallen to absolute silence, their attention given over to the narrative.

Pyrhentana closed her eyes, and for a moment it appeared as though she

might be in some pain. 'I do not think it a coincidence that these should be the first creatures I have encountered. I regret I was unable to save the other one but there is some subtle influence affecting us all. The quintessence is being overwritten by a discontinuous system.'

Bewilderment passed amongst her audience, and then Thraenrellis spoke. 'The other one—'

'The female is of great age. She wields the sombras que cortas. I am certain she is a Cousin of Faction Paradox, and she now has the other male.'

The Kithriarch winced, recalling her own testy denial of this mess being anything to do with *those* people, then went to the trestle. She stood catechising the final archemathic characters of the set, committing them to memory before returning to the Drudge to complete the code inscribed across the dull substance of its chest. To her surprise, she realised she was enjoying this. It seemed like it should count as action, something creative, something *developing* in defiance of the sterile - the slow, inevitable slide towards entropy.

It was wonderful that Gedarra had escaped, and endured, and had shown them the way; but that which lay upon the far side of the flaw was not their immediate concern. The chapterhouse, indeed this entire bubble universe, was dying, and they could not afford to fixate upon distractions or strategies they were as yet unable to effect. Their priorities lay with that which they might achieve right here.

Pyrhentana sat forward upon her cathedra, for now subtracted from the gestalt and recovering her strength. This seemed as good a time as any to intrude upon their diversion.

'Thraenrellis, I am ready for your assistance if it is to your convenience.'

The Ecclesiast rose from the huddle of chatter, stepping out of the half circle then pausing to ask some favour regarding what notes she had taken.

Emiousha stepped back from the Drudge, setting down her brush and pigment.

'Come forward.'

The clay man remained absolutely still, inanimate matter and nothing more. It resembled the colossal, frowning idol of a primitive. The Kithriarch had anticipated this.

'Come forward.'

Now the head tilted, brow low as though looking directly at her. It moved from side to side, a swift and curious motion unlike anything that

could have come from the standard servitor eidolon. It regarded its feet, and continued to regard them as though considering the uses to which they might be put. At length, its heavy brow pitched back towards Emiousha and it took a single unsteady step forward, then stopped.

Even motionless, it had more the mien of a living creature at rest.

'I am impressed.' Thraenrellis had kept her distance, but she was not the only one to find herself suddenly and profoundly fascinated. The air gallery was silent, all eyes upon the Drudge.

'As discussed, I would appreciate your bringing the amaranth, this being what might be deemed unexplored territory for all of us.'

'You are taking it outside, into the Netherweald?'

'Yes, for reasons of safety.' The Kithriarch considered this, wondering if her grand idea was really so different from Gedarra's blindly irresponsible leap of faith. 'Also I hope that direct exposure to our environment might stimulate,' - she asked herself just *what* she hoped it might stimulate, but had no answer. 'The Netherweald may prove more conducive to dialogue.'

Having raised the sack trap, the two of them led the Drudge, each taking an elbow as though the clay giant were a confused elder at the limit of mortality. At length they coaxed it down into the floor, taking it to the levels below as the guiding intelligence acclimatised to its new form.

At *greater* length, they came to the entrance vault at the lowest tier of the chapterhouse, having delayed their downward mobility only to collect the amaranth from the nosocomion. Both childrene stood readying themselves, securing the necessary leather blinkers before sliding back the bolt and opening the portcullis onto a stark expanse of grey.

Emiousha gestured for the clay giant to go forward. It appeared to consider its options, and then trudged outwards onto the shale.

'We are yet to identify by what sense it understands us.' Thraenrellis followed, hesitant steps as her gaze trailed the grey shape marching off into the mist. 'We should not allow it to go too far.'

'The boundary is now at just twenty-four paces, Ecclesiast. At twenty-five paces the Netherweald curves back in upon itself. I doubt even *we* could manage to lose it out here.'

They both went off after the colossus, obliged to jog so as to keep its silhouette in view through a fog which seemed distinctly thicker than on previous occasions, and which had become instilled with an almost gangrenous hue. After only a moment the Drudge halted and stood, head

inclined as though listening.

'What is it doing?' Thraenrellis looked around, awkward, self-consciously clutching the silver sphere of the amaranth to her chest. Her gaze fell to the ground and a curse escaped her lips. She stepped back, repulsed.

Emiousha looked to see a small, slow moving shape, something entirely physical. She recognised it as identical to the invertebrate seen in the athenæum, reddish orange carapace, feathered antennae. 'I have encountered this one before. Others have more fearsome aspect.'

She took a mental inventory, recalling the Towering man, the bandaged creature, the distant sound of something chopping wood and the two males. It struck her that there was a common aesthetic here, but nothing with which she was familiar. The Drudge might be able to provide an answer she decided, which was as good a place to begin as any.

'What factor unites the wraiths, or at least those wraiths which have taken corporeal form?'

'I would say—'

Thraenrellis was silenced with a single raised hand.

The Drudge continued to listen, or at least remained poised as though it might be listening.

The Kithriarch tried again. 'Drudge, what unites those wraiths which have physical form?'

The great block-like head turned to face her, but still it gave no reply. *It is of the Netherweald*, Emiousha thought. *It has no concept of anything other than the Netherweald, so does not recognise any division which might be described as united in the sense I mean.*

She looked down and saw that the large invertebrate still progressed across the stones, tipping and tumbling as it went as though inebriate. She pointed. 'What is this animal?'

The Drudge responded at last, its voice as grey and heavy as the air. 'That animal is the pinauiztli beetle.'

With a rush of subtle triumph, Emiousha went down to pluck the crawling creature from the stones, but it was no longer there, and seemed as though it had *never* been there. As with the bandaged apparition, there had been one state, and then a different state, with no incident of transition between the two.

Without warning, pain cramped her gut. She cried out, louder than she liked, falling forward and clutching at her stomach. She had no more recovered herself this houseday than any other, and it had been rash to suppose that mere industry could indefinitely postpone the worst symptoms of this loathsome condition.

Thraenrellis' face had turned more to wearied resignation than sympathy. She knelt down, moving to help her consociate stand. 'You know how well Laethynrisa improves. You too will soon attain that recovered state, I believe.'

Before Emiousha could respond, the Drudge spoke.

'She has stopped us from drawing breath. She has given us our flags and our strips of paper.'

It returned to silence.

7.4 (south)

Five days prior to the New Fire Ceremony and Momacani was once again stood on the eastward slope of Huixachtepetl, although this was the first time he had been here so close to the threshold of evening. All things came back to Huixachtepetl, it seemed; not that this struck him unusual - at least for the purpose of the New Fire, the renewal of the years, this hill was the central point of all creation, all times and places spinning about this axis in just one quarter part of an ilhuitl.

He gazed back across the land, to the fading world. To the south-east he saw the distant range of Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl, the snow capped guardians of the valley still gold with dying sun. Some way below these peaks, the squat girth of the Xicco cinder cone formed a circular navel at the centre of its lake, the volcanic heart of the Chalca confederacy. Chalco had been an enemy state for many years until Motecuhzoma Ihuilcamina brought it forcibly into the Threefold Alliance in the year Mactlactome Calli, or *Twelve House*. The New Fire Ceremony had not before been occasioned here upon Huixachtepetl. Fifty-two years previous, this hill had looked out across hostile territory, and Lord Ihuilcamina had been obliged to conduct the rite in Tenochtitlan itself; and of course it was a success: history had resumed and Momacani had been granted those years in which he had thus far lived his life. This change of location seemed typical of the younger Motecuhzoma, spectacle for the sake of spectacle, solutions imposed upon matters requiring no correction.

The calendar had decreed that today, by the grace of the incumbent Goddess Tlazolteotl, should have been a good day, Macuilli Ocelotl or *Five Jaguar*. It had been acceptable in so much as it had lacked the excitement of secretive voices or other supernatural intrusions, although that was most likely about to change. Five was the codifier of consummation, the number that made up the circuit - five cardinal directions to the universe, five days to go, *Five Jaguar* - and it seemed particularly foolish to be upon this hill as night approached, as the God of the Mountain moved into his house but, Momacani supposed without much conviction, it was a living. Perhaps tonight he would find some answers and today would turn out to have been a good day after all.

'Momacani, I have a sense of unease.' Chitilma emerged from the huddle of acacias, ending the moment of contemplation. 'I am certain this cannot be the Atlixocan cave. I have visited that place, and although time has passed I clearly recall it being in the vicinity of Azcapotzalco.'

'There is a mystery here.' Momacani offered this as explanation and nothing more. 'Ask Matlacoatl and it is near the town of Yauhtlan, whilst Paynalozmatli insists it is to be found in the north beyond Otompan, and yet for our Xochimilcan rabbit man, it is to be found here. I would say it is best not to ruminate upon this matter of the cartography at length.'

Chitilma did not seem to regard this as helpful but said nothing. He beckoned towards the group who mostly stood idling at the cave entrance. 'Dusk approaches. We must ready ourselves.'

Aside from the Xochimilcan, the group comprised Momacani, Matlacoatl, Chitilma and a senior Ixtilli named Icnopilli. Tlohtoxcatl had complained of feeling unwell that morning, but it seemed more likely that he had simply tired of intrigue and wished only to return to the more routine clerical matters of his office.

Icnopilli was a stooped elder with greying hair and reputed to have experienced much in the way of the strange phenomena to be found at the periphery of the noumenal world, which was perhaps why he was not given over to needless chatter. Atonal on the other hand was taking this opportunity to fully express his reservations to an audience of Mexica, apparently missing the point of their being here to help him, and to plead his case with a denizen of the underworld.

The old man chuckled in venomous fashion, concluding a spirited diatribe by observing that the Mexica as a race could not endure forever. 'Your Tenochtitlan must one day go the way of Tollan and Teotihuacan,

burning and ending as do all civilisations. You cannot deny it.'

'*Nothing* lasts forever, Atonal.' Matlacoatl was tiring of both the wait and the man for whom they were committed to intercede. 'And knowing this, most people tend to refrain from efforts to secure a few more years for themselves by brokering deals with the dead.'

This at least silenced the man.

For an indeterminate time they waited, or appeared to be waiting, aware on some level of their numbering six despite having ascended as only five, *and* that the sunset blazing red upon the horizon was by some means issued from the mouth of the cave; and that there was a stranger stood amongst them.

A choke of pallid fear escaped Atonal's throat.

Huemac the last ruler of the Toltecs was, as promised, a huge man as black as obsidian, more of a living absence of light than anything one might recognise as a person. His head was tilted at an unsettling angle and around his neck was the loop of rope by which, in life, he had absolved himself of responsibility for the ruin of his people.

— Now that really* is *interesting. I had a feeling they would be involved somewhere along the line, what with the name and everything.

Momacani drew a deep breath and imagined that he had not heard the voice. Yaotl had held her silence all day, and he would not be diverted from his course. 'You are Lord Huemac?'

The figure took a step towards Atonal. 'I expect you know why I'm here, old man.'

Momacani raised his club, stone blades turned towards the figure as he placed himself between the two of them. 'This Xochimilcan is under the protection of the Royal Court of Tenochtitlan, despite the counsel of common sense, and you will identify yourself.'

— Very masterful.

'Shut up.'

The black figure took a casual hold of the club, grasping the razor sharp blades without a care and casting it aside. For a moment he effected the impression of subjecting Momacani to his scrutiny despite the apparent absence of organs by which he might see.

'Identify yourself.' Icnopilli held his ground and made his face appear grave in the fading light. There was an element of threat to his words, and

nothing to indicate fear.

'I am Huemac. I come to claim this fool for the Realm of Mictlan,' - he raised an arm to indicate the Xochimilcan. 'We secured a deal some thirteen years past, so here I am. I think you'll find it's all entirely above board.' He appeared by some means to turn so as to address Atonal with genuine puzzlement. 'I assumed you had already informed these people of our arrangement.'

Icnopilli moved closer, joining Momacani so that together they formed a living shield before the elder. 'You imply kinship with Mictlan. I find that interesting.'

Momacani regarded his superior with some bewilderment before realisation dawned. He looked at the rope around the neck of the revenant. Those inspired to take their own lives through fear - as Huemac had done - were distinguished from those who gave of themselves in sacrifice and were associated with Cincalco, the House of Maize, one of the lesser known dead regions.

— That's very good. Keep going.

'Shut up.'

Icnopilli spared him a look that said *take a hold of yourself.*

'I've changed my mind.' Atonal had found his voice, barely. 'I no longer wish to go.'

Laughter inevitably rose from the depths of the shape stood before them, not the resonant boom one might expect, more like the guileless twitter of an adolescent. 'If there were a song with a beginning but no end, an aria that continued forever, would you care to sing it?'

'Take me in his place.' Momacani moved still nearer to the monstrosity, pushing the other behind him. 'I am younger and would I suspect be of greater interest.'

Lord Huemac stood still in apparent contemplation.

The Ixtilli considered all that he might learn were he granted *full* access to the lands below. Whilst it might be deemed rash to get so ahead of himself in this way, he was hardly lacking in resources, and he knew the Gods of the underworld to be famously slow-witted. If the world was truly changing, he had to act, and he was not presently in sufficiently expedient a position to do so. Whatever might befall him could surely be no worse than remaining here on the surface of the earth with a demon living uninvited inside his shadow.

— Not one of your better ideas, I must say.

'Shut up.'

'I beg your pardon?' Huemac, if this *was* Huemac, appeared by some means confused.

'I did not address you, sir, but I would nevertheless have your answer.'

The giant came forward with neither urgency nor menace despite his formidable appearance, pushing the Ixtilque aside and casting them to the soil as though they were only children. He grasped the struggling Atonal by the neck, holding him effortlessly up in the air at arm's length, ignoring the wheezing protests. Once again it appeared as though he was studying Momacani, and at length he gave a verdict.

'I do not think so. It's tempting but I gather you are still to encounter the beast of the city, the *Atepexolotl* as I believe you would call it. You are still to secure your fame.'

At last picking himself up from the ground, Momacani scrabbled around for his club in the half light, his voice risen with tension. 'What do you know of these matters?'

'That would be more the sort of thing with which the Mocolxiutecatl might involve themselves, but there was no harm in your asking.'

They were alone now, just four Ixtilque below the stars on the east face of Huixachtepetl, all sharing a memory of a black giant leading a sorrowful old man into a cave that was quite patently not there, a mystifying series of events which seemed only to have happened with hindsight.

The wind blew, and the group were startled by the screech of an owl amongst the acacias. Momacani realised that his eyes were not yet accustomed to the darkness, although he was sure that the sun had set some time ago. Again he patted at the ground feeling for his club, and his shadow appeared below him, cast by a moon that had just escaped from cloud cover.

There was movement and he saw Chitilma, face full with blood, club raised before a killing blow. Obsidian blades flew down. Moonlight glowed upon the stones directly beneath his body, and Chitilma was at his side, screaming, blood flowing in a river from his shoulder.

Momacani searched amongst their faces, committing this scene to memory, knowing he would recall it in the hope of understanding what had transpired, and why his own colleague should attack him without provocation.

The arm was severed a little way above the elbow, the club still gripped in its fingers, perhaps held by some reflexive quirk of musculature. The owner screamed and whimpered but the words were indistinct, and all that could be made out was that he had not anticipated losing an arm - which seemed somehow obvious.

7.5

The walls of Mictlan's Last Parliament are dark red stone supported by buttresses extending to infinity, no more an illusion than anything in Mictlan is an illusion. Stained glass windows line the great hall, each a grotesque Deification of the Lords Celestial. The nearest of these depicts Lord Ghost of the Broken as a severed tree trunk run through with a sword and dripping blood, although Lord Ghost of the Broken tends to be a location more often than he is a discrete entity. Lord Greatness-In-His-Hand is called to account by his fellow Celestis. Row upon row of the monstrosities occupy the tiered pews at either side. No two are alike, and barely a third of their number are identifiably hominid.

Lord Greatness-In-His-Hand has the floor and addresses the assembly as jeers and cries of support arise from both sides of the house. Goralschai has no recollection of the subject and imagines this to be an exclusively ceremonial exchange. The clamour is silenced by a figure rising to speak from the benches on the right, a great bull head with six horns, flesh resembling raw meat allowed to disintegrate in water. The sight recalls the presentation before all those third wave abominations, and yet that particular travesty might almost be deemed wholesome in comparison to this. Every last meme of this nightmare realm is tailored for maximum revulsion. No conceptual stone is left unturned for fear of something disgusting remaining hidden.

There is a tremendous irony here, Goralschai realises, in so much as these are his people, or were *his people. It was the Great Houses who first laid down the structure of the universe, who were directly responsible for the fact of the universe having any structure to speak of. For good or ill, they laid the foundation stone, and ultimately, perhaps indirectly, spawned this. These Celestis, whether they choose to recognise it or not, are parasites, the self-proclaimed dark gods whose existence is so precariously built from the beliefs of lesser species. They pour scorn upon a universe without which they are nothing, and there is somehow more dignity in the lowliest intestinal fluke than is to be found in all of Mictlan.*

Another figure rises from the bench, the Lord of the Red Moon. He is headless but for a small rocky globe pitted with tiny craters hanging in the sulphurous air over his shoulders. Naturally, it is red. Considering the nature of this place, its masters seem curiously lacking in imagination.

The Lord of the Red Moon expresses doubt that a certain enterprise has any chance of success, and Goralschai has the feeling that this refers to himself. There is laughter before the speaker can expand upon his objection, and a sarcastic remark regarding motivation.

Lord Greatness-In-His-Hand waits for the hubbub to subside before stating his avowed belief that meaningless destruction serves for its own reward, adding that his enterprise is undertaken for the purpose of entertainment alone, and whether it succeeds or fails is of less interest.

Water Sun digs Goralschai in the ribs and asks have I turned into a rabbit?

Goralschai says that so far as he is able to tell, the human remains human and has not become a rabbit. He is most likely expected to ask what is meant by this turn of phrase but he does not care to know the answer and says nothing.

Water Sun says that the Celestis twist words. He describes their words as dung and ordure, making it clear that he does not mean this in any positive sense.

Goralschai gives no reply, hoping this will end the exchange.

Water Sun presumes the silence to indicate at least a rudimentary understanding of the subject under debate. Goralschai denies this. He has the impression that the politics of the Lords Celestial is largely improvised, and that the appearance of their deeds is of greater importance than any anticipated result. He still does not know why he is here.

8.1 (east)

'The whole world is down there, past, present, and future, all of the cities and towns that have been or will be.' Primo had been telling Gedarra about Tlalocan, all that she would need to know. 'When we dream, that's where we are, even if we don't realise it, although there are other routes of access, certain caves, death by drowning if you're in a bit of a corner...'

She was up ahead, awkwardly climbing the forest slope, clutching at trunks of conifers for support and making an ascent so clumsy as to suggest high heels worn beneath the costume. Having earlier caught a glimpse of her feet, Primo knew that her shoes were unremarkable, no more ill-suited to their journey than his own sneakers. Perhaps they lacked hills on her planet, or maybe there were no forests. It might be some huge celestial billiard ball, smooth as a baby's behind like the world promised to Cyrus in Isaiah, mountains levelled to fill the oceans.

He thought about what he had said, all he had told her of his own experiences including those related by Todd when they on the road. He may as well have been describing the rise and fall of Teotihuacan for all that it sounded like something read out of a book, a narrative that could only have occurred to someone else and which he had now chosen to share. He could still see that which he had seen, here and in Tlalocan, and he could still see it with the full knowledge of it seeming entirely real; but he could no longer tell if he *believed* any of it, or whether he was just along for the ride. It seemed best not to think about this aspect, or at least to regard it as a private thought experiment.

Again he felt under the back of his shirt to where the wound had been. The skin was smooth, unbroken, so that hypothetical brain full of poison was looking a less and less likely excuse.

'Tell me about where you are from.'

Gedarra had already told him, but he hadn't really followed. She grew up in a house and this was the first time she had been away. She was here looking for someone who may or may not be her brother, apparently known as Rodney. Maybe she was actually from Europe, possibly England, which would at least explain her choice of dress.

'I have already told you all that I can. I do not think there is anything more.'

Either she was lying or he'd missed a great many points through lacking a common frame of reference, which seemed likely given that he couldn't even be sure of whether she addressed him in Spanish, Nahuatl or some other language. The fact that she had appeared from thin air as though beamed directly into Todd Calavero's automobile from William Shatner's orbiting spacecraft only complicated matters further.

'So tell me about Lorraine Conti.'

'It was my understanding that you knew that person from some previous encounter.'

He shook his head and overtook her, encouraged by the reduced incline of the ground up ahead. 'She did something to me, using that machine you mentioned.'

'Her remora.' There was a subtext to the annotation, resentment. Gedarra was also in possession of just such a device, one which was no longer working. 'I wonder what she was doing.'

The ground curved to a downward slope. They had crossed the brow of a low hill. Primo pointed. 'I hope we shall find the town there. We should hurry. I do not know the time and it may be dark soon.'

Regardless, Gedarra continued at her own maddeningly unflustered pace, examining the undergrowth each time she set a foot forward, holding her garment like a mediaeval princess. 'The shadow weapon suggests she was associated with an organisation called Faction Paradox at some point in her career. Recently, it would seem, she has become something else entirely.'

She may as well have said that Yaotl had been associated with an organisation called the Transformers, robots in disguise for all that this meant to Primo. He recalled the encounter in Coatlinchan but was still no better able to make sense of it. Yaotl's autonomous shadow was, Gedarra had tried to explain, an illusion, just his mind rationalising something comprising only semiotic mass, she had said. This concept wasn't a million miles from certain aspects of Nahua theology, at least so far as he understood it, but neither was it this which bothered him. It was what Yaotl had done to him, something with the remora. She had infected him, although it felt like an injury to a phantom limb, or at least that was how he imagined it - something old and hungry which had been with him for a long time, or *had* been with him for a long time as of a few hours ago. It was a yawning absence, something taken away which had first manifested itself in Cholula. The idol had changed, but he no longer had the means of

describing that which it had been before. He could even see it through the eyes of his namesake, Lord Acamapichtli considering the mountains, watching the rising plumes of smoke, absolutely unable to forge the link which made sense of these elements.

Somehow, Yaotl had stolen something from Mexico itself, and something very, very old; and everything else had shuffled around to close the conceptual gap.

Primo drew to a halt, realising he had left the woman behind. He turned to watch her coming down the slope through the woods, still infuriatingly slow but at least they had lost the Yaotl. He would have proposed some sort of rescue attempt but for the fact that this wasn't a telenovela and Todd could probably look after himself. As Gedarra approached, he realised she was once again talking to herself, or possibly to her people. They had established some sort of link, although they were trapped there and she was trapped here. He just caught*the quintessence is being overwritten by a discontinuous system* before she met his eye and fell silent.

'What does that even mean?'

She looked beyond him. Maybe she could see through the mist.

'The quintessence is the most fundamental level of being, the archemathic medium upon which the matter and meaning of the spiral politic is inscribed. A different system is being introduced, and somehow, you and I are part of the mechanism by which this is happening. From what you have told me, you have already noticed some changes in your life, occurrences which would seem to contradict the established laws.'

This was, for Primo, the moment when the last few days caught up with him, sank in. This was *really* happening, not a thought experiment. He remained no less in the dark, but understood that none of this was coincidence, imagination, or hallucination. For want of anything more coherent to say, he turned, nodding towards the foot of the hill where the mist seemed a little clearer, to where the lights of a town glowed dimly in the cloud bank.

'We're nearly there.'

They trudged on, picking up a little speed as the trees thinned.

He would need to sleep on this, although some of it made sense. He had always maintained that, for the sake of argument, the Gods of Mexico were real in so much as ideas and concepts can be said to be real; and he doubted Nahua theology had ever claimed different. This was another thing the

Christians had never quite managed to grasp with their somewhat more literal faith in powerful bearded men sat upon clouds, frowning darkly each time someone played with themselves or fell in love with the wrong person; but theirs was nevertheless the winning hand.

The same injustice had befallen Europe a few centuries earlier, barbarians at the gates and so on, swords turning out to be mightier than pens despite the proverb. It was always the stupid idea that caught on, the story that even the village idiot could follow without giving himself a headache. Human history was a ratings war, and people would always choose the flashing lights, special effects, and generic hero pleading*you don't have to do this!* over things of real value.

'I would say you are given to many serious thoughts.'

Now she sounded like a Swedish tourist.

Primo nodded. 'The way you talk about the universe and how it works, I'm beginning to appreciate that it may not be so different to how,' - he felt awkward saying it but what the hell - 'to how my ancestors saw things. In some ways, I'm actually a little bothered by how much of this is beginning to make sense.'

They walked on in silence, the long wet grass condensing to a dirt track, in turn becoming a road roughly paved with pebbles and cracked slabs of asphalt. At length they came to the outskirts of the town, Río Frío de Juárez. Weeds clumped from cracks in the sidewalk as they passed crumbling walls, huts and dwellings fabricated from concrete blocks, here and there an older place, brightly painted adobe and red ceramic roof tiles.

Gedarra was staring in apparent amazement and Primo recalled her claim of never having left her house. He had today met at least one person from somewhere other than Earth, possibly two, but still he knew his own experience would seem prosaic compared to hers.

He regarded her robe, dress, whatever it was. He'd already decided that awkward questions could be countered with a story about travelling pantomime and how their coach had a flat. Not that he could imagine anyone living up here entertaining any desire so lively as curiosity. Somehow, it just didn't seem like that sort of place, but that was probably the fog.

'We need to get you some decent clothes and then decide what we're going to do.'

'What are we going to do?'

'That would be the thing we need to decide.' Now he recalled something else she'd said earlier. It hadn't made sense at the time because it seemed to imply that she was about three years old, despite all evidence to the contrary. Maybe these people just grew up real fast. 'I don't know what we're going to do. That's why we should probably make a decision.'

They came to the end of the street, finding themselves on another that seemed a little less derelict. It was beginning to look very much like a town that might not have any place to buy clothes, nor even so much as a market. If the worst came to the worst, they could find a hotel and maybe spin the owner a sob story. People tended towards sympathy out in places like this. They were a long way from the city.

For no obvious reason, entirely out of the blue, he recalled the passage in *Codex Chalchiuhtlatonac* describing Fire in the Serpent making a twin. Where had *that* come from, he wondered, then backtracked through a train of idle thoughts from sob stories told in hotel foyers, to checking into hotels with one's belongings, to one's belongings no longer including a copy of *Codex Chalchiuhtlatonac* since Gedarra blew up Todd Calavero's automobile.

Maybe I'm the twin, he thought, and maybe that's why I remember. *He and I share the same life, even the same ixihtec*. It was an insane thought but it worked just fine.

The uniting factor seemed to be the brujo, the sorcerer below the world, down there in Tlalocan. Gedarra had referred to a mentor figure by the name of Goralschai.

Primo considered this peculiarly insubstantial woman in her pantomime costume and wondered if he was quite ready for another voyage to the underworld.

8.2 (north)

Three times Todd had pushed his trolley down this aisle, but still no chicken stock. Three times he'd passed that same brown and yellow package, right colours but not at all what he wanted so he'd paid it no mind. He knew they hadn't rearranged the store because he'd found most everything else just where he expected to find it, and there was the packet gravy and the oil so he was surely looking in the right place. Maybe the chicken stock people had changed the design some, but it didn't seem likely.

He was in a daze, his thoughts had broken out like a little herd of goats

and were now stood around on top of cars or munching on a neighbour's roses. Why, he wondered, would he still be embarrassed about something that had never happened?

He went down the steps and around the side of JMB Restoration towards the parking lot, turning the corner into blinding sunlight. Traffic roared upon the Austin Highway, about a quarter mile distant on the other side of the waste ground, San Antonio rush hour in full swing, although it didn't seem so bad today. He saw his Chevy Caprice Classic at the other end of the lot, a blob of maroon swimming the asphalt heat haze. He went over, noticing a woman walking a small dog just across the way. She was at some distance but he found his eyes trailing her. She looked to be Mexican and wore a shocking pink halter top. Something about that combination just drew him right in like picnic ants, warm bronze and that material so bright it almost burned your eyes. Selena wore that kind of thing before some fool said it made her look like a perrucha.

The woman took a right at the end and began heading down towards him. He cut between the nearest two vehicles, crossed the dividing stretch of soil and crab grass and onto the sidewalk. It was as good a detour as any. A truck roared past on his left, grinding gears as it turned into the lot at back of HEB and he quickened his step, driven beyond anything resembling guilt by those hormones. Only a month before it would never have occurred to him even to look at another woman, but there was a whole lot had changed and he wasn't going to beat himself up over it.

This flamingo vision drew near but Todd found himself agape at her pet. He stood mesmerised, waiting for the illusion to falter, but it grew stronger with each second. On some level he knew his feet were now rooted to the sidewalk and that he was staring, and that the woman had certainly noticed. The Chihuahua was about average size, a little on the chunky side, with a long soft coat of tan fur and bright eyes. This dog didn't just look *like Face, it* was *Face.*

'You like my puppy?' The muchacha slowed up, smiling against all odds.

Todd was shook. It was a moment before he realised she'd spoken to him. 'Yeah. I had a little guy just like this. That's why I er,' - he was suddenly and painfully aware of how ridiculous he must seem - 'I mean I thought it was him. The resemblance...'

'His name's Troy.'

The little dog licked Todd's hand as he leant down, a tiny pink tongue and eyes twinkling with innocent canine excitement.

'I can't believe this ain't him.' He petted the silky fur along the Chihuahua's back, still searching for whatever would definitively set this dog apart from his own, but the illusion held. 'Mine was called Scarface.'

Brown and yellow; now he plucked the can right from the shelf, right colour, except it wasn't stock. It was - he stumbled across jagged letters - *tecuitlatl*, whatever the hell *that* was. The picture on the label was just some green shit, like porridge or maybe some kind of Mexican spinach. The main ingredient, he read on the back, was *chlorophyta*, which left him none the wiser and sounded some way short of mouth watering.

He looked down into his basket, having second thoughts about his impulse purchase of Michihuauhtli. The listed ingredients did everything to suggest affordable caviar aside from mentioning caviar. Figuring someone was maybe farming those big Russian fish, he'd added the can to his weekly groceries in a spirit of adventure, but the more he thought about it, the less likely it seemed. The fruity looking cartoon animal grinning from the packaging made him think of a mosquito, and two dollars was about eighteen short of believable.

He set the can back onto the nearest shelf and decided he had all he needed.

Ten minutes later, that being all the time it took to check out and drive back across Harry Wurzbach, he stood in his kitchen mixing up batter and making pancakes in between washing dishes and trying to find his radio station.

'Leave it, Todd. I like that well enough.' Selena padded in like some house cat, hair all messed from sleep, scraping a chair back from the table.

'Well okay.' He looked at the radio, aware that on some level it was conspiring with the manufacturers of both *tecuitlatl* and*michihuauhtli* to freak him out. The station, one he knew with absolute certainty had not existed before today, played mainly that Mexican Indian stuff, all drums and whistles and chanting. 'How many you want?'

She yawned and made an effort to open her eyes. 'What you fixing, sweetheart?'

'Pancakes.'

'Nice.' She pulled that face, doubt plastered over with team spirit, like he'd told her that today they would be having dog food for breakfast but she wasn't going to rain on his parade. 'I'll have as many as you're having.'

He played around with the griddle and a jug of batter for a few more

minutes, gradually stacking the serving platter at the centre of the table.

'Go ahead. Help yourself. I'll fix you some coffee.'

He watched her move a pancake to her plate, then cut off a morsel and chew like she was expecting the taste of armpit. Then she relaxed and started to dig in. 'These are pretty good.'

He said nothing and began pulling cups from the drying rack. This was fucking crazy.

'So how was Justin?'

Todd stalled, taking a moment to recall last night with Justin and Andre. They had been in two bars total, and he'd drank no more than five beers. There really wasn't a whole lot else to report, but still he preferred to keep his thoughts right here in the present, things he could see and trust. This shit would come together, any moment now. He just had to hang in there.

'Justin's good.'

This was at least true. Andre was also good and had been glad to be back from the front which, for his unit, was a line roughly bisecting the counties of Butler and Harvey just north-east of Wichita. The enemy had occupied most of the top part of what was once Kansas. They'd been driven out of Oklahoma, but the situation didn't look like it was going to be over any time soon. Todd knew he could mention this to Selena and she would only look at him for a second and then go back to reading the newspaper.

Having finished with her daily horoscope and a dumb news item on one of those Kardashian girls, the one with the huge face - Todd always got them mixed up - Selena was done, chewing those pancakes in silence, still looking at the plate like she was trying to work out which part of the cow she'd just eaten.

He sat and opened up the paper, taking care to swallow his mouthful of coffee before anything too strange could leap out from the headlines. Oddly, the news seemed low on surprises, or at least low on surprises once you were used to the idea of America as some screwy coalition of tribal groups, a country only in terms of land mass and a long way from ever having been anything you could call *united*. He *wasn't* used to the idea of course, but he was trying not to let this interfere with his day and had thus far done a reasonable job of it.

'So you're gonna see to that damn tree.' She sipped her coffee, a weird little Mexican sphinx here in his kitchen, no clue as to whether that had been a question, a statement, a command...

'Yup.' He speared a wedge of pancake upon his fork, swabbed it in the pool of syrup and popped it in his mouth whilst recalling the situation in the garage, what handsaw would have been left where, whether the job might require an axe borrowed off Nate from across the way and so on. These thoughts were comforting, ordinary, a world away in the literal sense from Justin fretting over how many insurgent captives he would be expected to bring back for purposes no-one really seemed happy to discuss.

As it turned out, neither handsaw nor axe were necessary. Out in the yard, he hooked the end of the rake over the dead branch and gave an experimental tug, which turned out to be just enough to do the job. The wood was dark and dense but brittle as mesquite tends to be, snapping with little provocation, sweeping down.

He yelped and jumped out of the way, dropping the rake as the log thumped to the ground, shattering into five large pieces. The power cables wobbled amongst the branches, chastened by the experience but otherwise unharmed. Todd wished he'd realised it would be this easy, but then mesquite trees didn't usually get so big and he could hardly be blamed for thinking it a daunting task, something to be approached with caution.

Selena would be watching her stories now. He could hear the television coming from the porch. All those weeks apart and now that none of that had happened, he could hardly stand to be in the same room as his own wife. It wasn't nothing personal, just he somehow knew she wasn't Selena, or at least she wasn't *his* Selena. He looked around the yard, devising ways to stretch out the job so as to avoid going back inside.

The branch had broken into five parts of roughly equal size, each three or four foot in length and heavy as rocks. He cursed and stumbled, muscles burning, recalling petrified wood he'd seen out by Pearsall and figuring it must weigh about the same. Sweating, he took them one at a time to make up a stack by the fence, that part of the yard that stayed overgrown and wild beyond taming for all but the most extreme of the Summer months when everything scorched and turned to dust. The final part of the branch, he realised, had been host to a big old ball of mistletoe, still a deep green despite the heat and unaware that it's days were very much numbered.

Then again, the branch had been dead for a while. He thought mistletoe was a parasite living off other plants, but maybe he'd figured wrong.

He picked up the log and carried it over to the others, recalling being sat in his ride with that Mexican version of himself. He'd held a mesquite sprig tight in his fist, squeezing the life out of it. That had been in San Miguel

Coatlinchan, down in Mexico. He thought of that last morning, reaching for the moment at which it all ceased to make sense.

'I figured on finding you here.'

Glancing over one shoulder, he saw a flash of brown fur.

He turned to see.

It was his dog - Scarface, his *dead* dog, talking to him like in a cartoon.

'We've got some things we need to deal with, man.'

8.3 (west)

Laethynrisa held one arm out straight before her. The concentration upon her face betrayed the futility of the exercise. She was attempting, without success, to initiate her remora.

'I can feel it, but it doesn't respond.'

This had at least answered one question. The regressive effect that had crippled the chapterhouse remained constant regardless of proximity to the breeding engine. Emiousha ran a hand across its smooth ceramic canopy, luxuriating in the ambience of technology. She could sense her own remora still snug within its custom twist of folded space, but the contacts had probably turned to wood or something of the sort.

It was Dorhira who had finally stumbled across the catacomb, then on the seventh tier, of which all chambers had most certainly already been checked many times over. It initially seemed like it had lost its mooring within the architexture, and had taken to shifting from one place to another like a restless cat; although it was more accurately the case that the architexture had come adrift of the engine which, after all, was still intrinsically integrated with the caldera on some level. Dorhira's discovery was not of itself so surprising as the fact of the breeding engine having remained free of the entropic taint that had befallen the rest of the house.

The two childrene were at opposite sides of the catacomb, each with her back to the wall, the square bulk of the engine between them. Emiousha had not been in here for a long time. This was where she had been loomed. They had all been loomed here, the biodata, the entire history of each childe woven within this very chamber - aside from the male childrene, the genesis of whom had now apparently never happened. This was where Ordnance-Tetrarch Goralschai had seeded the chapterhouse, the entire experimental bloodline. This was the heart of their universe.

Now, with the sadness of one who becomes a stranger, Emiousha saw this formerly hallowed ground as a process, something crude and technological with prescribed tasks and functions. *Perhaps*, she thought to herself, *I am growing up.*

'If the breeding engine still draws power from the caldera,' - Laethynrisa appeared to suck at a tooth in consideration of her point - 'then I don't quite follow...' She trailed off, unsure of just what question she had been about to ask.

'The breeding engine is, as I understand it, an aspect of the caldera. The archemathics involved are unfortunately beyond definition by means of ordinary language. Sadly, it is not a ventilation tunnel through which we might crawl in order to return to the spiral politic, assuming your thoughts ran along such lines.'

'Ah.' The Sophist drummed her fingers on the ceramic upper surface of the engine.

The Kithriarch performed a similar action, albeit one tailored by purpose. Purring, the engine responded to her touch, expanding a gietesphere from the space between herself and Laethynrisa. She felt an unaccustomed thrill, the experience of warm, accommodating routines after all this time struggling with wood, paper, and aching limbs. She felt better than she had in a good number of housedays, and now this, as though the quintessence was rewarding her improved health, as though the realities of life in the chapterhouse took their cue from her own peace of mind.

She aligned to the contact points, luxuriating in the raw information, so enlivened by the experience as to postpone all consideration of that which it described at least for a moment or two. She felt Laethynrisa now similarly aligned with the gietesphere, narrating in the upper range.

—Emiousha, the chapterhouse is dying. Consider...

She expanded the active force structures, taking stock. They had been getting by on the inherent integrity of the Netherweald, itself fortified by some unknown external source - according to the gietesphere - a source which had seemingly run dry. The chapterhouse was gradually eating itself alive.

She has stopped us from drawing breath. She has given us our flags and our strips of paper.

Emiousha had envisioned the regression as some form of retreat, the architexture rebelling against all that it had once been, a violent reaction against all that dull, suffocating continuity. Now she saw it for what it was,

a desperate bid for survival: cutting back to more primitive forms as starvation deferred by drinking brackish water and eating grass.

—*It is worse than I feared.* Again Laethynrisa's narrative, now drawing attention to the archemathics degrading with each parthenogenetic conception *and* around the migration of both Rhodenet and Gedarra; and so the architexture had of course cauterised the wounds.

The chapterhouse was not only dying. It had sealed the exits.

Shocked from an all too brief spell of euphoria, Emiousha collapsed her gietesphere contact points, wondering if it might have been better to remain in ignorance, or at least ignorance beyond the more general sense of impending doom deriving from the obvious reduction of the Netherweald, now recursive at a mere fifteen paces.

Moments passed before the Sophist withdrew and they both watched in silence as the routines folded down into a quaternion sphere, then to nothing. Neither of them spoke.

The Kithriarch brought a ball of twine from her pouch, attaching one end to the armature of the breeding engine - a primitive solution resembling something from an archaic tale: an orthogonal narrative, something of mythic type. Considering the absurdity of the solution, she succumbed to a murmur of nervous laughter but still said nothing. The two of them secured the other end of the twine to the balustrade out on the landing and then went their separate ways.

Pyrhentana was in the air gallery, still relating Gedarra's experience of the world beyond, now with just Rothis left to take notes. Of all the childrene, Emiousha had never quite known what to make of Rothis. She seemed more preoccupied with appearance than was common for one of so few years, applying pigment to her face and wearing her hair in three long, dark braids. Her manner hinted at aspirations running wildly at odds with those of the other childrene, doubtless reflecting the Raithaduine material which had been amalgamated with her biodata.

'Well met, Kithriarch.' Rothis considered her. There was an intensity to this childe's gaze, an awareness of the discomfort she inspired, perhaps even some resentment. 'The Primo has explained to Gedarra that it believes there to be a sorcerer beneath the surface of its world.'

Emiousha acknowledged the report and felt suddenly uneasy at having entertained such uncharitable thoughts towards her consociate. 'There is no more?'

'She has an idea that recent events experienced by this creature may in some way relate to our own situation, but she has difficulty understanding its words.'

'She has been unable to achieve semiosis?'

'You misconstrue me. She comprehends his idiom quite well. The Primo refers to concepts for which we have no frame of reference.'

Still enmeshed within the gestalt, Pyrhentana slumped in her cathedra, head to one side, eyes lacking focus. Her voice was not much more than a whisper. 'You will take me with you.'

The Kithriarch turned away.

The Drudge remained where she had left it, great clay head upturned in a study of the bellum notitia. Following the inscrutable declaration of having been given flags and strips of paper, it had introduced itself as *Tecpatl*, returned to the air gallery, and announced that it wished to consider the situation. It had not moved since.

'Tecpatl, I wonder if...'

Emiousha could not fully bring herself to express the request. The notion of a Drudge having taken a name for itself was too peculiar. 'Never mind.'

She wondered whether it could still access the routines woven into the bellum notitia as it had done before, or at least as its servitor eidolon had done before. Neither tapestry nor Drudge were technological in the vulgar sense, which was undoubtedly why they had failed to regress alongside everything else, although clearly the bellum notitia had been affected in some other way. The images sewn across its plait were now entirely unfamiliar; obscure figures hurling themselves onto a fire in furtherance of birthing both a star and a small planetoid; the planetoid's reflective luminance reduced by means of a small herbivorous quadruped with long ears.

A scream sounded from somewhere below in the depths of the chapterhouse, a wail of anguish suffixed with distant sobbing.

Eyes wide and white, Rothis began to speak but her Kithriarch was already half way through the sack trap, pounding down six flights and five landings to the nosocomion. Pulse hastening, Emiousha slammed the gateway aside, then froze as though turned to frost by the first ray of dawn sunlight. Dorhira writhed before her on the catafalque, screaming and keening, clawing at her gut, face slick with panic. Thraenrellis was at the

childe's side, holding her steady, pitched back and forth by her spluttering spasms of grief.

The Kithriarch regarded the amaranth, left where it lay upon the floor, wedged up against the base of a caryatid apparently having rolled there. Clear as any picture could be from this one unsettling tableau, the story had written itself before the question could be framed: *what have you done to Dorhira?*

There were six childrene left in House Meddhoran, each fallen to automictic parthenogenesis, each harbouring a unique cluster of cells wrapped within its own tiny skein of future history. *This is then only another aspect of discontinuity*, Dorhira had announced upon learning of a neonate growing within her own flesh. *This is simply another problem to be overcome.*

Staring at the amaranth, the Kithriarch felt the subtle taint of unfamiliar chemicals coursing through her veins, colouring her thoughts. Something terrible had happened here. There were no means by which any of them could have anticipated such an outcome as this.

Clack... clack... clack...

The childe's keening had subsided to an environmental whine of despair, muted as Thraenrellis held a silencing hand across her mouth. Everyone within the nosocomion was stilled, no movement but for the shiver of a body fighting its own urge to flee, their eyes white and lost to the proximity of horror.

Clack... clack... clack...

Now *feeling* the sound cracking over her, Emiousha turned.

Filling the egress was a near naked male figure, bronzed flesh and a length of cloth wrapped around its pelvis. It had no head, the skin smooth from one shoulder to the other; and the flesh of its chest opened and closed, shutters of skin and bone snapping like wood as they scythed shut upon the dark hollow at its centre.

In the instant before her scream, Emiousha came to the realisation of there being something inside the chest cavity, something shiny...

Clack... clack... clack...

8.4 (south)

The monster within his shadow was, he decided, something more in the

line of an ill-mannered and unfortunately constant companion than a watchful spirit. It would intrude upon his thoughts from time to time, but on occasion he sensed its distraction or at least that its attention lay elsewhere, leaving him free to cogitate upon what matters concerned him without interruption. Presently this was a mercy, for he considered his situation already quite sufficiently complicated without the need of further confusion. He now knew with some certainty that he was to be offered in sacrifice to the God Xiuhtecuhtli in just four days. This was troubling in many respects, but it was clear that his main priority was to reconcile himself to the fact as best he was able, and so he was at present particularly glad to be free of Yaotl's mystifying counsel.

The courtyard of the Ixtilcalli building swarmed with people, mostly belonging to the various Pochteca guilds. They milled around in their colourful robes and those faintly ludicrous pointed hats fashioned from carved softwood. Their conversation buzzed with too much vigour to allow for the comprehension of any specific detail but most had been given painted pages, intelligence from Lord Motecuhzoma, pictographic accounts of recent events which they were to relay to Cholula, Huexotzinco, Otompan, and other distant cities in preface to the New Fire Ceremony. The Lord had been told - presumably by his usual somewhat cranky and religiously inspired sources - to anticipate the arrival of a guest named, rather unimaginatively, Acamapichtli. This struck Momacani as significant, although he could not quite say why.

Today was Chicoce Cuauhtli or *Six Eagle* as presided over by Xipe Totec and Quetzalcoatl; also Mixcoatl, Camaxtli and Tlamatzincatl if one felt like going utterly crazy and viewing the entire ilhuitl in divinatory terms. It would be, according to the Tonalpohualli calendar, a good day, and this was underscored by the cheery blue square of warm, sunlit sky above the courtyard. Momacani hoped this meant that the day might be favourable specifically for himself, but the calculations in theological terms were beyond his present means.

The Pochteca cleared leaving just a group of Ixtilque in their customary unassuming cotton robes. The traders had most likely regarded them as servants. Atlazol - an uncommon presence here - came to fetch Momacani from the chamber in which he had been detained, bringing him forward with a fatherly smile but none of the anticipated words of explanation, perhaps being unsure of how best to broach the subject. He bowed to perform the customary greeting and the others following his lead with unusual reverence.

Tlohtoxcatl, stinking to the highest of heavens, seemed more himself this morning. He emerged from beneath an arch like a scorpion to sit at the side of the pool, pleased and less brash in manner than he had been in recent days. 'Momacani, after some consideration of this matter, it is my understanding that you have become the Ixiptla of Huitzilopochtli himself.'

Hardly expecting this, the Ixtilli almost laughed but was dissuaded by the awestruck and conspicuously silent faces of his colleagues. The Ixiptla was chosen by the Royal Court, never by the God or Goddess or any other theological agency, but then in the run-up to a New Fire ceremony these were undeniably special circumstances. The Ixiptla was, to an untutored eye, a person chosen to impersonate a God for a period of time, enjoying all the benefits of Deification up until the point of their being offered in sacrifice. This was as good a definition as any which one might relate to either macehual or foreigner, although it missed significant points pertaining to the true forms of those above and below or near and close, and it was more accurate to state that, once selected, the Ixiptla *was* the God or Goddess in all senses that mattered. Momacani saw the wisdom of this straight away: his own southern heritage, the fortification of his day-sign and the supernatural visitations of war which occurred in his presence; so far as Tlohtoxcatl was concerned, Momacani *was* Huitzilopochtli, the Solar God and saviour of the Mexica race.

Suddenly weak with prestige, the Ixtilli sat, overwhelmed.

For some reason the thought that filled his head was why his colleagues should have believed it necessary to test his piety with so rude and clumsy an assault. Had someone simply thought to ask *have you or have you not recently found yourself tainted by sacred forces?*he might simply have answered *yes* and Chitilma would still be blessed with a plurality of arms.

'You are in addition, we are reasonably reliably informed, heir to some strange and foreign heritage with roots far beyond such as is allowed by our present understanding.' Tlohtoxcatl paused, evidently taking pleasure from the delivery of this edict. 'Lord Motecuhzoma himself suspects that your ancestors may have been the Mocolxiutecatl, or at least of their kind. In any case, we are all quite beside ourselves to find such a precious jewel in our midst.'

'The prophecy given by Ocotochtli—'

'You will make war with the beast of the city, and the people will be grateful, and in this way will your fame be fortified.' The priest chuckled. 'As you must appreciate, we are taking this matter of your apotheosis quite

seriously.'

'But that which it describes is yet to happen. Is it wise to simply hope that fate will furnish me with some occurrence of that nature during the next four days?'

Tlohtoxcatl submitted an uncomfortable grumbling noise, his eyes darting briefly amongst the other Ixtilli. 'It has come to our attention that Chitilma, in the privacy of his own dwelling, had quite recently fallen to certain beastly habits. For the present we are assuming that he was your beast of the city.'

'Can we take that chance? If I am to be sacrificed in defiance of that which is written within the book of my life, can we trust that it will not bring the most terrible of sacred forces to bear upon the world?'

'I am quite confident that all will be fine.' Grunting somewhat, the priest allowed himself to be hoisted up to a standing position by Matlacoatl. 'Just concern yourself with taking some pleasure from the next few days. As the Ixiptla of Huitzilopochtli you must be untroubled and happy within your numerous souls.'

The group took its leave, and two jaguar knights showed Momacani to a luxurious chamber within the larger Calmecac building. The room was hung with fine tapestries of red and black depicting scenes from the life of Huitzilopochtli, how he led his people out of Aztlan, then across the northern deserts to the founding of their home on the island of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, maintaining high spirits during their great peregrination and inspiring them to acts of good-natured violence against the tribes they encountered.

His mat was woven of silk, and as he took his place, attendants came with trays of maize and peppers, cooked meats and other fine foods. The knights remained at the entrance as he broke his fast, and it was impressed upon him that he was by some definition a prisoner, or at least that he was no longer entirely at liberty, which was only to be expected.

— So, it would seem you're to be sacrificed.

He selected a fruit of the nopal cacti and bit into it, surprised to find that he was today greatly less troubled by the presence of Yaotl. He had, against expectation, grown accustomed to her odious presence, and he realised he no longer truly knew his own mind in this particular respect.

— This prophecy of yours troubles me. I think your instincts were right.

Within his thoughts, at some level below that of language, Momacani framed a question.

— The beast of the city, this Atepexolotl as you call it: I don't think we can afford to take the chance that it might not matter, or has already happened but you blinked and missed it.

Momacani took a sip from a ceramic cup containing a mixture of fruit juice and aniseed, and considered the jaguar knights stood either side of the door. It had been made a matter of record that he was afflicted by the sacred, so what they might think of him no longer seemed important. He therefore spoke aloud, addressing his inner voice quite clearly. 'So what do you suggest?'

The eyes of the guards turned towards him, then away in deference to his piety.

— I suggest you get out of here. Whatever else fate may have lined up for you probably isn't going to happen if you're sat around stuffing your face these next few days.

'Regarding those activities of the next few days, it is the privilege of the Ixiptla to be provided with courtesans, which I'm sure you will appreciate provides some further incentive for my sitting around and stuffing my face.' He chewed, waiting for a response which never came.

Having eaten and slept for a short time, Momacani then found himself subject to the attention of another group of attendants who disrobed him, washed his body, and scented him with oils. Next he was dressed, not with the common clothes of the Ixtilque as before, but with the raiment of his newly elevated status - a mantle of the finest blue feathers across his shoulders hemmed with golden bells, a cotton breech-clout of red and black, jaguar pelt cuffs and new deer-hide sandals; and of course the hummingbird headdress with all the associate jewellery of gold, jade and coral. Soon the ixihtec of Huitzilopochtli had settled upon him as an almost tangible presence, becoming an integral part of his being.

Atlazol returned with some of his retinue. 'Magnificent!'

'Thank you.'

They went from the Calmecac, a royal procession but for their being no more than five in number heading for the Great Temple, the stepped pyramid at the heart of the ceremonial square, the city, and indeed, the cosmos. Having been recently expanded, it now stood taller than ever, more imposing than even those platforms at Cholula or in the ruins of

Tollan, two rows of ninety-three steps running up the western face to the twin shrines at the summit - that of Tlaloc to the north, and Huitzilopochtli to the south. The five of them climbed, saving their words whilst their breath was devoted to the exertion.

At length they reached the top to stand gazing out across the city.

Atlazol spoke words memorised for the occasion, delivering them with his own informal timbre as though they were only part of some conversation. 'See here, our Mexico-Tenochtitlan at the heart of the waters. Life is coming to its end in but four days. The world regards us, placing in us a trust that we shall do what is correct, that we of Toltec Inheritance will renew the years when the Many are at zenith.'

— That being the Pleiades I presume.

The noble set a hand upon Momacani's shoulder. 'We are all very proud of you, my child. I know you will not let us down.'

There being little he could say to this, the former Ixtilli looked across the city, to the lake and the mountains beyond, Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl and towards the south: Huixachtepetl waiting for him to give of himself and so renew the count of the years.

He thought of Huitzilopochtli leading the people across the desert, the tribe forced to live at Tizapaan with only serpents for their sustenance, Tlacalael stood at the gates of Azcapotzalco promising that not one Tecpanec would be left alive, and he wondered if he was still the same person today as he had been earlier that day.

8.5

The Gods are attacking the Earth Monster. One takes hold of her right arm and left leg, the other her left arm and right leg, and they pull in opposite directions, tearing her apart. She is fighting back and Tezcatlipoca loses a foot to her jaws.

They redouble their efforts and the creature is torn in two, a neat split running right down to the tip of her tail, dragon blood everywhere. Her upper half sinks and plants grow amongst the reptilian mountain range of her back. Her lower half ascends to form the heavens. She weeps and wails for the blood of humanity, for the blood by which she may be sustained in her sundered condition. She is only trying to stay alive.

This is not the foundation of an ordered cosmos, but Goralschai finds he appreciates its honesty. It is happening without need of sanction by either

himself or the Great Houses. It is for the most part its own thing.

It isn't really happening, but then what does that even mean, and can there truly be any understanding which is not tainted with the medium of its perception? Some of these memories almost certainly belong to Water Sun. This culture clearly has something that has long been sterilised from the bloodlines of the Great Houses - not that the realisation changes anything, but it is somehow a pleasing thought: the matter transducer outgunned by the stone axe.

Before him is a long avenue, carved stone walls running down either side. It is the sort of avenue built so as to allow for a procession rather than the conveyance of people from one place to another. The creatures here are not entirely hominid, and the issue of species is an irrelevance. Culturally they are related to Water Sun by some means.

A great bonfire blazes about half way along the avenue.

The God Tecciztecatl approaches, a tall roughly human form, bronzed arms wrapped in gold bands. He wears a tabard of fine cotton, expertly woven with gold coloured thread. His brow is of the sort that one could describe as noble. He flexes his muscles, sweat glistening from the flames then runs at the fire fast as he can, feet pounding the grass. He hesitates, cantering to the side of the flames and drawing to a halt, breathing hard. The look upon his face makes it clear that he is not yet done, and that this was only a false start. Those watching should not be fooled into thinking the task easy, or that anyone but Tecciztecatl might be equal to such a challenge.

A figure scampers out of the dark to run at the flame, naked but for a dirty cloth at his waste with no attempt to conceal the scabs and sores marring his flesh. Tecciztecatl calls out, addressing the comical figure as Nanautzin but is too late. The tiny man has thrown himself onto the blaze. His screams fill the night air. Already he is becoming the sun, now burning in the heavens. Tecciztecatl curses and turns back, taking a second run at the flames and this time succeeding. Shortly there are two suns blazing in the sky.

Papaztac hurls a rabbit at Tecciztecatl to dim his light to that of the moon, but there is still no motion in the sky. Nothing is moving.

Xolotl, the twin of Quetzalcoatl, sacrifices the gods one by one, stretching each out in turn across a barrel cactus. The blood flows, and gradually there is sufficient to breath life into the sun so that it can move across the sky, then through the underworld at night to return again in the

morning.

If he is to go forward it seems right that whatever he might do, he should do it by honest means, that is by some mechanism running true to itself. At this point he is still not sure of his own intentions, but believes that if they are aligned with something of nature, something that is only itself, then his actions will be true.

9.1 (east)

'I preferred the place we were before. It was more comfortable.' Gedarra blew out a cloud of grey smoke, watching shadows dance across the roof of the cave to the crackling rhythm of the ocote wood torches. 'It was in some senses like House Meddhoran.'

This didn't say much for House Meddhoran, but the point was redundant so Primo gave no answer. He too had preferred the hotel, or at least the back room which the store owner had insisted they take once Primo flashed a few hundred pesos; *this* following their conversation about why no-one had thought to open a hotel in Río Frío de Juárez. He'd slept deeply and profoundly, glad to be full of food and to have spoken to his mother by telephone; but that was yesterday, and today was a different matter. He had a feeling that this would not go well for him, made all the worse by the conviction that it was not anything in which he had a choice.

Gedarra had finished her cigarette. He threw her another carton, *Alas* brand, rough as fuck. Someone had once told him what *alas*meant in English, a word spoken when expressing regret, the regret of finding oneself smoking Alas, for example. He wished he'd taken up smoking back when he was a kid and the opportunity first arose. It would have made this a whole lot easier.

They had spent the day buying the things they would need, something more practical for Gedarra to wear - jeans and a shirt - before returning to the hills to find a suitable cave, one which might serve as an entrance to Tlalocan. Neither of the first two caves had been suitable. Primo had immediately recognised the scent of a curse in each, that odour which Doña Ultima had never formally acknowledged as the spore of a cave dwelling fungus that would steal the breath right out of your body, even kill you in extreme cases. He had impressed himself in recalling this detail from his youth when he would spend school holidays in Cholula; assuming he *had* remembered it, that it wasn't just some new thing that had turned up as part of the deal with the healing.

The mist was gone and the sun was setting - as could be seen through the trees - temporarily blinding them as it sat upon the western horizon making ready to sink into the underworld. The temperature was similarly falling to a chill but here they were protected from the elements, and hopefully from *other* things by the smoke of their cigarettes, their crackling

ocote torches, and thick clouds of copal incense. Primo watched the light fading, undecided as to whether he'd just bid farewell to his ordinary life, or whether he'd ever truly had one.

'Here is looking at you, kid.' It was a line from a film he hadn't seen but it seemed appropriate. He twisted the cap from the mezcal and took a swig, then came up gasping for air, throat hot and raw. He passed it to Gedarra. 'It has quite a kick, so be warned.'

'It is necessary to consume this?' She regarded the bottle with caution, clearly failing to understand the mechanism by which the liquid might kick her.

'It is necessary. We need to open ourselves up to,' - he almost bit his lip as he stated it absolutely without irony - 'sacred forces.'

She swigged and tried not to choke. Her eyes watered and her voice was hoarse. 'How much?'

'One bottle between us should be enough, I imagine.' He went to his mat, purchased earlier from a hardware store in the town, now serving to denote the threshold between worlds and additionally laden with food: tortillas, chocolate bars, a polystyrene catering cup of atole that had gone cold, a chicken heart in plastic wrap. Kneeling he took the lighter from his pocket and held the flame to candles poked into the soft earth at the corners of the mat.

'The trouble with this sort of work,' - he fumbled a fresh carton of Alas from his other pocket - 'is that I keep forgetting to smoke.'

After a few painful drags, fighting back the nausea of a nicotine rush, he began on the prayers, the incantations, beginning with the Pater Noster, then Ave Maria, and then a patchy version of the Symbolum Apostolorum, this segued into what he could recall of a hymn to Tlaloc that had been transcribed by Daniel G. Brinton in the late 1800s. The letter of the incantation was, as he understood it, most likely secondary to the establishment of a particular effect. It was some months since he'd been in church, but he'd spent one hell of a lot of time in consideration of the mechanics of prayer, albeit in less subjective terms.

'Ahuia xiyanouia, ahuia xiyamotequaya ay poyauhtla, ayauh chicauaztlica ayauicallo tlalloca.' He spluttered, having rushed the last part before another coughing fit could erupt from his diaphragm. He took a swig of mezcal and picked a tortilla from the pile. He tore off a chunk and threw it into the darkness as though feeding subterranean ducks. 'Grant us access to the world below, oh Lords who do administrate such affairs.'

There was a noise from behind which Gedarra didn't quite conceal with a cough.

He turned. 'Is there something you would like to say?'

She shook her head. He'd spent at least an hour describing this ritual, what they would do, and what he hoped it might achieve. She seemed sceptical but said it reminded her of Faction Paradox whom she had already mentioned once in connection with Yaotl.

'Okay. See this.' Primo unwrapped the chicken hearts, holding four of them in his palm for her inspection as though they were large meaty beans. The first movements were faint, growing stronger, until all four tiny hearts pulsed with life in his hand, nothing to pump but ocote smoke, but nonetheless alive. 'This is really happening.'

He said this as much for his own benefit as he tossed the hearts into the depths of the cave, blood for the spirits, or the saints, or whatever was down there; something to keep them happy, something to make up for that which they had lost when they created the world. He took up the rest of the hearts, holding them in his fist to squeeze life into them, then throwing them pulsing into the darkness as a main to follow the starter. It had come as something of a relief to realise that his ixihtec dispensed with the need to sacrifice a live rooster. He'd seen his grandmother do that a couple of times back when he was small. She had said that colour television and American hamburgers had made him soft and squeamish, a few stages removed from the bloody red pulse of the universe. She was probably right.

'What is a Youaltepoztli?'

It took Primo a moment to appreciate that this question had been addressed to him. The woman had been mumbling away under her breath on and off for the last few minutes.

'It's an aspect of Tezcatlipoca, a night spirit I suppose you would say, a bad omen.'

'How would one fight such a being?'

She's speaking to those people in the house, he realised, the place in the west. He thought for a moment, recalling that Sahagún had written about the Axe of the Night in the *Florentine Codex*. He told Gedarra as much as he knew, then listened as she repeated it back.

'Primo is aware of this creature from the stories of his species. He tells me that its heart is made of some precious stone and is located in the chest cavity. If one is able to reach in and take the heart before the rib cage

closes, the creature may be compelled towards obedience.' Message relayed, she feel silent, staring at him, or at least in his direction, smoking in the manner of a child with its first cigarette, big grey clouds still heavy with nicotine.

He waited a moment before speaking. 'I think you should concentrate now, okay?'

There was a rattle from the depths of the cave, a serpent hiss, faint but unmistakable.

Considering Gedarra and her absent friends, he wondered if a telepathic conversation held in the presence of underworld spirits was anything like using a mobile phone whilst driving, guessing that it probably was. The roof of the cave now seemed so far away, and he noticed that it was studded with clouds and stars.

'We are in Tlalocan.'

'I see.' Gedarra stood at a little distance, puzzling over her surrounds. She patted at a jeans pockets, an incongruous gesture. 'We are physical, yet I anticipated a non-corporeal excursion.'

'You're thinking too much.' He didn't actually know whether this was true, but had a conviction that the reality of the experience was irrelevant. He turned slowly through a full circle to take his bearings, marking off the four directions against a memorised inventory, noting that he had now acquired at least one sense beyond the traditional five: likely something to do with the Quincunx, he decided, the causal design in which he was embroiled.

'What is the Quincunx?'

He wasn't even going to think about what had prompted the question. 'The Quincunx is the universe, made up of the five cardinal points. Apan, the great ocean in the east,' - he pointed - 'Cincalco, the Realm of the Fleshless in the north; Cihuatlan, the female direction also termed Tamoanchan in the west; Huitztlan, the land of thorns in the south. We need to find the fifth point, which is the centre.'

A second rattle caught his ear and he looked down to see a snake slipping from the pavement, down to the street. There was a metal tube before him, a vertical pole which he realised was the stand for a pesero. This was Mexico City, or rather *a* Mexico City. Strange that this undoubtedly hallucinatory experience was not more disorientating. Somehow it felt natural. Perhaps this was thanks to his nagual, the small

serpent.

'What are we doing?' Gedarra sounded troubled. This was outside her experience, although it seemed as though more or less everything was outside her experience.

'We are catching a pesero. I am hoping that it will take us where we need to go.'

The green and white minibus pulled up to the sidewalk and they boarded, somehow effecting to pay fare to a disinterested driver just as they would have done in the world above. The bus pulled out into heavy traffic, heading south towards Asturias, orbiting the roundabout then heading east, stopping and starting as passengers got on or off. After twenty minutes, a low hill began to dominate the horizon up ahead.

'Cerro de la Estrella.' Primo pointed through the windshield. 'Huixachtepetl as they knew it in the time of the Mexica. He's up there. We must be careful now.'

The ascent of the hill was as confusing as the journey from the city centre, neither time nor distance working by quite the same means down here in Tlalocan. The brujo was still there, building his structure, a wood platform at the centre of a cross orientated to the directions. Down here there was no division between symbol and that which it represented. Primo could see himself as the eastern arm, Gedarra's people over there in the west. It was a ritual undertaking, although this was hardly unusual given the territory. His own life, possibly his entire existence, was a totem, just an object by which meaning was written upon the sacred space.

'I know this man, this bruja as you call him.' Gedarra watched the builder at work. 'He is Goralschai. He was an Ordnance-Tetrarch loomed of House Xianthellipse.'

Recalling Huixachtepetl as the place where the Mexica once ordered the structure of time, where they renewed their universe each fifty-two years, Primo suffered a shiver of foreboding.

9.2 (north)

The best approach to holding a conversation with a talking dog was, so it turned out, to ignore the fact of it being a dog, also that it was speaking English. Todd couldn't see how that was physically possible with a throat made mainly for barking, but there it was. There really wasn't much good to be had in fixating on how damn stupid it all seemed, one impossible

thing piled on another; and he was now at the point where he'd decided that if his beloved Chihuahua really *had* returned from the grave to deliver a message in the language of Shakespeare and all of those guys, then he should probably listen.

'Let's just say I'm your nagual, your animal spirit guide.' The little dog sat panting on one of the mesquite logs, eyes dark and full of sparkle like in some Japanese animation. 'Or at least let's just say that's as good a way of putting it as any.'

Todd sat at the other end of the log, pulling heavy yard work gloves from his hands. 'I *knew* this shit couldn't be real.'

'It's real, although maybe not in the sense you have in mind.' Face gently wagged his tail. Being a dog, he probably couldn't help it. It seemed like an involuntary tic. 'You know what I mean by nagual, right? You know where I'm coming from with this?'

Nagual was one of those words he knew from Mexico as a kid, that time they went to see Doña Ultima. It was part of that world of chickens strangled in caves and people who viewed el Día de los Muertos in terms of a chance to visit with their folks.

'I'm dead. This is the afterlife.'

'No, but you *are* dying. There is a brujera. She has your yolia, and that is why.'

'She has my yolia.'

'It is a part of your soul, the breath you might say. You were born with no breath of your own, but instead draw your breath from other living things. The brujera has imprisoned this part of your substance in the world below the ground.'

'Wait, I have no breath *and* some witch has taken my breath prisoner.'

'It's complicated.'

'I see.' Todd looked around at his yard, the fruit of his efforts to turn the place into the sort of thing his Mom would call a garden without sneering. He had spent two apparently imaginary years clawing it back from its natural state, the sort of chain link nightmare you'd see filled with diseased pit bulls and their poop on *Animal Cops San Antonio*. If none of this had happened, how come he still had a yard full of weeds? What a fucking drag.

'I draw my breath from other living things?'

The dog scratched himself behind the ear. 'Well yes, under normal circumstances—'

'Which this ain't.' He had no idea why this had only just occurred to him. The cold, the touch of death, none of that applied here, therefore this was not an ordinary place and the people around him were not alive. From this he concluded that the way it had been before, cast out and living at his moms', fucked up though it surely was, it had at least been real. He was surprised by how good it felt to have come to such a realisation.

Face yapped, stood up, walked in a circle, then sat down again just as he had done in life when he wanted to be let out into the yard. Now that he was able to talk and conceive of complicated plans, the affectation doubled for impatience as he waited for his human to catch up.

'So we need to go to the underworld, okay? We need to reclaim your breath.'

'You said I didn't—'

'For the sake of argument let's say you do and we need to get it back. Trust me on this.'

Todd could already see this as a Disney cartoon, the little boy and his magic dog off on their quest. The thought didn't make him happy. He wondered if they would meet other talking animals on the way, each one eager to retrieve something or other from the underworld, from*Mictlan* as Ultima had called it. He didn't know if he could handle advice given out by a squeaky voiced chipmunk.

The point at which he realised this was, despite reservations, the right course of action came three minutes later. They went inside to discuss the *quest* with Selena. She was still sat at the table reading *People* magazine. She'd turned on the television in the living room but had been apparently unable to tear herself away from reading Randy Rainbow's rebuttal of Lil Wayne. The pancakes lay cold on her plate.

'You're going where?' She wasn't happy. She scowled and drew her head back like a cobra. 'How long you figure on being gone? Tomorrow is Byron's chilli cook-off up at the first Presbyterian or did you forget about that?'

The timing of the trip bothered her, but its having been proposed by a talking Chihuahua wasn't so big a deal, which told Todd all he needed to know. His exit stage left sounded like a neglected television set, Selena wailing him out, and Chihuahua nails clicking across a hardwood floor. The

screen door creaked shut upon another part of Todd's life that hadn't happened and they got in the car, Face up front on a cushion so he could see where they were going.

'Just where *are* we going?' Todd craned his neck, checking the road behind as they pulled out, avoiding Selena's toxic gaze radiating from the behind the blinds. 'I mean I get that we're going to er,' - he swallowed, self-conscious - '*Mictlan*, but I'mma need directions, you know?'

'We need a cave.' The little dog looked around, bright-eyed, incongruously happy as always. 'One accesses the underworld by caves, lakes, or rivers.'

'And by dying I would guess.'

'That too, *and* drowning, although I guess you could say that's covered by lakes and rivers.'

They took a right, then a left, then another right, heading up towards Broadway.

'There's the Robber Baron Cave off Nacogdoches. How would that be?'

'If it's a cave, then that's what we want.' Face panted, watching some guy walking his dog at the side of the road. 'We can get in there, you think?'

'I don't know. It's like this huge sink hole at the side of the road, but I'm not sure you can go down inside. I guess we can take a look. There's Natural Bridge Caverns off Austin Highway, but that's a whole lot further.'

They drove on, taking North New Braunfels past Sunset Ridge, heading into the wealthier suburbs of the imaginary city. *I'm mistletoe*, Todd thought, *I was living on that tree, and now I'm cut off, just moving forward until I sputter out*. He wondered if this life might present him with other obvious symbols for his consideration, truths revealed in the everyday details. It felt a little like this whole world was all for *his* benefit, so maybe.

Demarcated by a chain link stockade around its sink hole, the cave was coming up on the left when the electronic swoop of a siren pummelled the air. The Chihuahua dipped down below the dash, tail between his legs. Todd glared into the rear view. 'What the hell?'

He pulled over, watching as the cop did the same. There was just one, same old fat white dude in reflective shades as always. Thankfully the cops here were apparently modelled on their real-life donut chugging counterparts rather than the movie version.

'Real nice day for driving, wouldn't you say, Mr. Calavero?' He was chewing gum, thumbs in belt loops. This did not seem encouraging, and

nor did the guy somehow knowing his name.

Saying nothing, Todd wound down his window. 'I can help you?'

'I was just saying what a fine day it is. Where you heading, son?'

'I'm just driving is all.'

The cop looked left and right for no obvious reason other than this seeming like the sort of thing he would do, then leant down, hand upon the roof. 'Thing is, it's my understanding that you boys don't have permission to leave the city limits.'

Boys would be Todd *and* his talking dog it seemed, which said a whole lot.

'I'm dying, so why would you care?'

'Don't make no difference.' He held the Batman doll at arm's length, a jet engine splutter rasping from his lips as he granted Bruce Wayne the power of flight in defiance of established continuity. 'That's right, Poo-Face, you'd better run!'

'You mean Two-Face, asshole.' Todd knew he was being pissy for it's own sake, but they were action figures, *not dolls*. What was wrong with the kid?

Hector grinned. 'I know what I said.'

Heart going all out, Todd stomped on the gas. Tires screeched as they spat turf in their wake. It wasn't so much that the cop had been his grade school buddy, it was the fact that he had himself slipped right back into eight-year old character that scared him most. He glanced in the rear view to see red and blue flashing in time to the siren like some marauding gay club had taken to the streets and was hunting him down. He swore. 'This town ain't *never* gonna let us go.'

'Nobody said it would be easy.' The Chihuahua climbed back onto the seat, looking behind to watch the pursing vehicle. 'Just try to lose him, and don't worry too much about your driving. I'm guessing the city wants you alive, seeing as its so keen to keep a hold of you.'

He floored it, hitting sixty in a conspicuously built up area. Other vehicles scattered as they sped past, swerving wild arcs across front gardens somehow without consequence. The siren reared up like a serpent, passing on the left and keeping pace. Todd had been fixing to turn, to take a circle and double back to the cave, but he was now low on options and approaching the intersection too fast. He swerved around a truck and beneath the overpass. Horns screamed as cars slipped into a kaleidoscope

of traffic at the lights, the cop car trapped at the heart of the chaos.

'Can you see him?'

'No I can't.' Face had hopped over the seat for a better view. 'You realise he's only the focus? Soon enough the city will figure out that it doesn't matter whether you believe in whatever it sends after you.'

'Shit.'

'So where we heading now?'

He didn't know, but at least if he stuck to the main strip he could keep up his speed, and the longer he could keep on going, the more time he had to come up with something. He wondered about the caves at that Natural Bridge place and the quickest route to the Austin Highway.

There was a whimpering noise, his dog - his *back-from-the-dead* dog. It caught him out, a moment of realism in this stupid damn fantasy. The cop siren screamed at his side and black and white flashed in the wing mirror. He spun the wheel, realising too late where they were. The car hit the crash barrier, flipping over and over through the sky like a coin tossed into a fountain, down towards the flood waters of Salado Creek.

They hit.

They went under.

9.3 (west)

The weapon was wood, a great length of it like a staff. Emiousha swung it around again and again, beating at the creature in the egress of the nosocomion. This pole, baton, whatever it was, had been the first object to come to hand as she reached out for something which might be turned against the monstrosity. Possibly it had been a eutheroid in its previous existence. She went another step forward, reclaiming territory, thrilling at the hollow clamour of her blows battering the dried leather torso as though it were a drum, relishing the crack of bone as it offered up an arm as defence. Within moments they were on the landing, the woody clack of its shuttered chest echoing up and down the escalier now sounding somehow more like a distress signal. To the left of the creature were steps leading up to the air gallery, behind it another ingress, the gateway wide open. Emiousha could not recall its purpose, possibly storage.

There was a roar from above, an avalanche of feet, Rothis hurtling down with the lumbar support beam of a cathedra held aloft like a mace. She

vaulted the last few steps, swinging her improvised weapon, slamming it into the creature. It staggered upon gruesomely distended limbs and fell backwards.

The Kithriarch reached out, muscles straining just a little further than she had considered possible, taking the edge of the gateway and dragging it shut. It was done.

The two of them stood there sharing deep, heavy breaths, momentarily regarding one another before Rothis slumped to sit upon the third step. Thraenrellis remained in the ingress of the nosocomion, amaranth cradled in one hand. She looked either angry or maybe embarrassed. She was saying something about discontinuity and how Dorhira's neonate had been rationalised by the amaranth. Her point was difficult to follow in the wake of what had happened.

Emiousha knew only that the amaranth had been useless against the monster. The conclusion she drew from this was that a headless man with a cabinet for a chest could no longer be considered a discontinuity under the circumstances.

Clack... clack... clack...

Interned in such a small space, the muted sound was somehow all the more disturbing: the adrenaline surge of a nightmare had reduced to a terrible waking truth. The rules had progressed from bundled monstrosities conveniently breaking down into sand and stone when captured. Without a word, Emiousha went up the stairs taking two at a time, ignoring the desperate rasp of her lungs. She passed Laethynrisa on the second landing. The childe stood clutching at the balustrade for support, an arm curved beneath her distended abdomen, pain creasing her face.

'The breeding engine, we have lost it again and the catacomb—'

Time permitted no distraction. Emiousha ran past, hoping her consociate would understand. Five further flights of steps brought her to the uppermost landing with more breath remaining than she had anticipated, the nausea of previous housedays all but gone.

She ascended, up through the sack trap and into the air gallery.

'...discontinuity represents infection by alternate laws bearing only superficial resemblance to those presently defining the spiral politic. If so, the wraiths might be the warning mechanism of this new system.' - Pyrhentana, still propped up in her cathedra, muttered on, the voice of Gedarra from the distance of an entire universe. 'House Meddhoran is

telling us we're in trouble...'

This actually sounded like it meant something, and no-one was taking notes. The Kithriarch cursed beneath her breath, hoping that somehow, down in the athenæum, Pyrhentana's biologue would be spontaneously filling with new pages.

She went over to the Drudge. 'Tecpatl, what is the headless creature? How do we destroy it?'

She examined the silent clay face, the ponderous brow, willing it to reveal its secrets. This thing was their decoder, their cryptographer, their ambassador to the Netherweald. Her catechism had been painstaking, and the Drudge, she had decided, would reward the diligence of this work.

Its head tilted down and its jaw began to move. 'You speak of the Axe of the Night, or Youaltepoztli as we know him. He is but one form of the One Who Made Himself.'

'I see.' Emiousha ordered her thoughts. 'The creature's biology, if not impossible, is so impractical as to implicate the agency of something other than natural forces; whilst our breeding engine is alone in remaining incongruently resistant to Netherweald influence. This suggests a process entailing conscious decision rather than coincidence.'

'Youaltepoztli is a fearful omen, as are both the Nexquimilli and pinauiztli. These are all fearful omens.' The clay brow appeared to frown, most likely an effect of the light.

'House Meddhoran is dying, more than half of the childrene are gone, and the survivors have fallen to immaculate and impossible conception. If these wraiths are truly omens as you say, what *further* misfortune could they possibly portend?' Emiousha cursed herself for having yielded to sarcasm, and the Drudge for its wearying ambiguity. 'Tecpatl, you will give me answers!'

Apparently not.

She had viewed this immaculate conception as a condition, a carcinoma, something to be endured and which would be treated under other circumstances; but aside from her biological routines being all over the place, she realised she hadn't given it much thought beyond the ignominy of herself reduced to this animal function like some four legged beast of the marshes; but *now* the idea hit her with full force - she was a throwback. They were *all* throwbacks. Something had revived functions that had been lost to their species since before the advent of recorded history. She should be repulsed, but truthfully had no idea just how she felt, here with a belly

full of alien cells dividing and dividing again.

She recalled Laethynrisa on the landing cradling that ridiculous globe of innards, dark hollows beneath her eyes from being kept awake at night by the neonate kicking at the blood engorged walls of its cell.

The Kithriarch realised she could not possibly know any of these details. She hadn't spoken to Laethynrisa since they found the catacomb, and the female had been fine then. Events were happening too fast, out of sequence, skipping along like a corrupted media shred.

'...coincidence of finding myself here. The other one, the one known as Todd...'

Gedarra's monologue continued to spill quietly from Pyrhentana's lips, ceaseless as a mountain stream. This had been some point of possible importance, and Emiousha had missed it. For whatever reason, no-one had considered that anything useful regarding the plight of the chapterhouse might come from the other side. The most they had hoped for, all they had expected was whether the world beyond the flaw would prove either habitable or accessible, and if so, by what means. Again Emiousha entertained a fervent wish that Gedarra's account should find its way into her biologue in the athenæum, and that they would find time to examine it thoroughly.

Perhaps Rothis might make a start upon that.

She crossed the chamber, taking up position before the mumbling Autodidact. The female's head moved in response to her presence, and she spoke, a voice from a great distance.

'Kithriarch?'

'Gedarra, what manner of beast is the Youaltepoztli? Is it known in that place?'

Pyrhentana blinked, pale blue eyes with unusually dark lashes. The effect was somehow unsettling. A moment passed and she spoke again. 'Primo is aware of this creature from the stories of his species. He tells me that its heart is made of some precious stone and is located in the chest cavity. If one is able to reach in and take the heart before the rib cage closes, the creature may be compelled towards obedience.'

Wincing, Emiousha decided that next time someone started going on about Faction Paradox as the authors of all their misery, she wasn't going to bother arguing.

She turned again to the Drudge. Even without the servitor eidolon it

would still surely serve her purpose. Tecpatl might be an expression of the Netherweald, but it had described that thing they had captured as *fearful*. That *had* to be indicative of its sympathies.

The Queen of the House went to the highest room. She went to discuss matters with Tecpatl. Tecpatl listened to her plea. She told him "the Axe of Night visits our sisters and causes great fear and upset." That is what she said to him.

Tecpatl said "you know of that which you must do. Your sister already has carried a message from the East. Did she carry this message over such a long distance for no reason? Do the sores upon her feet serve only for her meal?"

Staring at the blank grey profile, Emiousha wondered if she was losing her mind, or maybe this was some new hazard of life in the Netherweald, another stupid, confusing mystery to be endured in lieu of alternatives. Perhaps continuity itself had begun to degrade, to revert to earlier, more primitive forms.

Tecpatl moved, restlessly shifting from one foot to the other, an action which served to remind Emiousha that it was no longer in any sense a Drudge. Again it spoke.

'Everything must go to its end just as rain runs downhill to fill the Earth and the mountains. Nothing endures, and that which is most precious lives only days. All must turn to ash.'

The Kithriarch decided she really *was* losing her mind.

'You are quite well. I simply answered your question.' Tecpatl gave a little bow following some peculiar etiquette of its own. 'I understand how this may appear confusing or upsetting. My desire reaches no further than the restoration of order.'

The Queen of the House seeks the advice of her Message Bearer. She went to her Message Bearer and asked "do I walk along the road looking all around? Do I throw dirt over myself?"

Message Bearer says nothing. She reads the page. She studies the pictures and divines their meanings. She did this but would still not speak. That was her task in those days. A message was delivered from that distant place but Tecpatl saw it. He understood it would not go well for him.

Message Bearer began to speak but was startled by the sun. Tecpatl rose in the North as the sun. He threw his arrows there. He threw them at Messenger. She died there. The ray of the sun went into her and she

became cold. This is why we say that it is always coldest before dawn.

Pyrhentana was silenced and still, a childe of cold black glass inert upon her cathedra.

The Netherweald is turning to a different order of spacetime, Emiousha realised - taking no comfort whatsoever from the revelation that she was herself still entirely sane. This was something closer to the orthogonal fictions of the lesser species, the stories by which they defined themselves, history as the function of an eternal present. She scrabbled through her memory for the term - *mythology*. The Netherweald was, for whatever reason, migrating to a mythological reality, to orthogonal spacetime.

She looked at the vitrified corpse of Pyrhentana.

She looked at Tecpatl.

She ran.

9.4 (south)

Momacani had no idea how he came to make it out of Tenochtitlan in one piece. Whilst the Calmecac had not been heavily guarded - there being little point to such precaution in a city which so thoroughly barricaded itself against nocturnal horrors each evening - those few knights left on duty were persistent, pursuing him right to the southernmost tip of the island before he conspired to lose himself amongst its tangle of canals and alleys. In theory, the Ixiptla of Huitzilopochtli should, by right, be granted every wish, but with three days left before the New Fire Ceremony on Huixachtepetl, such decrees were reduced to so many fine words; *or* it could be that no-one had considered the possibility that he might try to escape, given that even Momacani himself considered the idea unorthodox.

Were it not for the prophecy delivered by Ocotochtli so many years before, and the insistence of Yaotl that it was unlikely to have been just some arbitrary announcement on the part of his former patron, he would not have troubled himself to abscond. Considering all that was at stake, it presently seemed unwise to regard anything as an irrelevance thrown up by mere chance

Having waited for the sky to lighten in the east, Momacani emerged from the wood pile that had been his shelter. Padding quietly through crepuscular gloom, he made for the shore to the root of the Itztapalapan causeway and, hidden amongst reeds at the lake's edge, sat waiting for sunrise. Cold water numbed his ankles as he kept an ear open for the first

birds, but too hasty a crossing would attract unwanted attention from those watching the bridge. The eastern shadows of Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl were deepening against the ocean blue expanse of heaven. Thin streaks of cloud crowded along the horizon to presage the arrival of Tlahuixcalpantecuhtli, the Lord of the House of Dawn, silk cotton wisps smudging blood red as the God fortified his victory over the retreating night.

It would not be long now. Hooting duck calls began to drift across the softly lapping water and Momacani shivered as the warmth leeched from his bones: the frost God Itzlacoliuhqui bringing the inaugural chill of daybreak. The sky cleared from deep to mid-blue as a distant clatter of domestic activity rose in response. The city was waking and its first steps would soon be heard upon the causeway. Gold now flashed at the cusp of the mountains, the eagle embarking upon its daily journey across the sky. Right on cue, feet crunched gravel as Tenochtitlan's early risers went out onto the causeway. A quick glance along the bank confirmed the absence of anyone who might take too keen an interest in persons emerging from the reeds. Softly and silently, he crept from the shallows, his feet emerging cold and cramped from the water. He rubbed them back to soft, raw life and tied his sandals.

The causeway was not yet populous, but there were enough people heading for the mainland to provide cover. The family trailing three young daughters might be off to visit distant relatives; clearer intent could be seen in the troop of Pochteca, backs bearing heavy frames laden with goods to be traded in remote and alien provinces; others would most likely be travelling on agricultural business. Early morning mist was rising from the lake, obscuring where the end of the stone bridge met the Itztapalapan mainland. A distant smut of movement marked out tiny stick people crossing from the other side.

Affecting a casual presence, Momacani fell into loose step behind the family - not so close as to draw their attention, but close enough to pass for a taciturn brother-in-law. The robes of his newly acquired office had been left behind in the Calmecac for obvious reasons, although he had brought the jewellery carried in a small pouch, and felt some confidence that his near naked state, messed and dirty from hiding in the reeds, would provide adequate disguise.

The mist had cleared from the crystal expanse of Lake Texcoco and the sun had blossomed in the sky by the time he came to the far end of the causeway. The early morning rush had begun, bringing ever larger crowds

onto the bridge from Itztapalapan and the surrounding land. Merchants and traders, commoners and dignitaries, farmers and fishermen - all bound for Tenochtitlan with produce, ceramicware, clothing, information, or whatever stock they thought might do well at market.

From Itztapalapan he crossed the ridge of land down to the shore of Lake Chalco, from there taking the next causeway to the island town of Xicco. Entering the settlement, he came to the realisation that he had no clear idea why he was here, at least nothing beyond the raw impulse for flight which had occupied his thoughts since dawn, to the exclusion of all else. It seemed likely, he reasoned, that his progress had been dictated either by happenstance - that which seemed right and convenient at the time - or Yaotl had provided direction by some subtle means. He took her continued silence as confirmation of the latter being the case, trusting that she would talk - or at least communicate - only when it became necessary.

Xicco belonged to the Chalca confederacy, a Nahua group who had been brought into Tenochtitlan's tribute network just a few generations before. Former hostilities were not yet entirely forgotten, which he hoped might at least hinder those Mexica officials following or otherwise wishing to detain him.

— I need you to buy clothes.

This was the first he had heard from the spirit within his shadow that day. Finding himself in a crowded market, it seemed he could get away with muttering under his breath, particularly given his dishevelled appearance. 'I would say I stand less chance of being recognised as I am.'

— The clothes are for me.

He had no response for this, hardly knowing what it might portend. Dutifully he scoured the market place, attracting curious glances as he exchanged jade and gold for a woman's garments, huipil, skirt, and sandals, each item picked out by the voice within as amused Chalcan traders showed him their wares and discussed prices.

— There has been a minor change of plan. This she offered as explanation for her sudden need of clothing. Momacani had folded his purchases carefully, carrying them as he left the town, following along the steep rock wall that formed the base of the Xicco cinder cone.***It is time I freed myself from your shadow, so be glad that I will no longer be heard inside your head.***

This was not something he had considered, the possibility that he might soon be unburdened. It occurred to him that it was patently a positive

development, although so much else had changed during the last few days that it could hardly be viewed as a return to normality.

He found a path leading up the side of the cinder cone into the crater, a vast basin given over to agriculture and, of all errant geological sports to be seen in the Valley, surely one of the strangest. He had once been party to a group who, during summer with the snow at its mildest, had ascended Popocatepetl to gather sulphur from within the basin at the summit. The shape of that concave peak now reminded him of this Chalca land, and he tried to imagine what geological process could have fashioned this natural bowl shape. Somehow it seemed wrong that he did not know, as though some thought or idea was being kept from him.

At the high ridge he turned to the west and from there could see Xochimilco, the chinampas spread out across the farthest end of the lake. Six days had passed in what felt like a year.

He ascended the slope into the great horticultural bowl of Xicco, a self-contained world divided into thin strips of pasture. It was approaching midday so the fields were only sparsely attended, with no-one working so close as to be able to call out to him should they be inclined to do so. He laid the clothes purchased at the market upon a clean shelf of rock at the edge of the crater, and set to work as Yaotl's directions filled his thoughts. After the work of a short while he had assembled a suitable pile of farming debris, the drying stalks of plants pulled from the fertile earth once their fruit had been picked, leaves, a few ears of maize, and a pumpkin.

First he placed the squash upon the ground before him, building a body, stepping back from time to time allowing his shadow to fall across the vegetation so as to use it as a template. Packed with leaves, stalk and twig cages became arms and legs, with corn and pads of nopal cacti for heart, lungs and other organs. At length, having fashioned the full shape of a human, he was done. He interposed himself between his vegetable effigy and the sun, enclosing it within the darkness in which Yaotl had been resident these past few days. He had been instructed to remain as still as possible and did so for a long time, allowing only his thoughts to wander freely, savouring a peculiar sensation of falling that he guessed might be caused by the demon taking occupation of its new body. The sun crept across heaven and the shadow moved across the ground drawing strange pale flesh, somewhat corpulent, from the light.

She had lost the dead boy and could do no more in her present location. Momacani had no idea how he knew this or what it could mean, but presumed it had driven her to take physical form. Perhaps the sorcery of

moving from one state to another was in some way just like travelling from place to place, carrying one's belongings with occasionally a private thought revealed in the way of intimate possessions strewn accidentally upon the path. He wondered if he had heard some previous reference to a dead boy, but could recall only Atonal's descent into the underworld, and at sixty-five years he could hardly have been considered a boy.

The heat was turning fierce, and Momacani began to wonder how long he had been stood here and how much longer he would be required to remain? *As long as it takes for the sun to push a shadow a few paces across the ground* was the obvious answer: a long time, although it felt as though he had already been here longer. His eyes ached as the sunlit rock turned to an indistinct blaze of white, halo to a nebulous patch of night. He closed them.

Opening them once more, he saw that the process was near completion.

Before him upon the rock, distilled from nothing more than sunlight, was a woman left at high tide as his shadow receded. Her flesh was a ghastly pale colour like the gums of one upon the verge of death, an unhealthy hue in contrast to the dark sheen of her hair. He estimated her age to be thirty or more, certainly very old. As his shadow crept the final length of one cemiztitl, she lay beached, immobile but twitching, eyes rolling in their sockets; and of course she was entirely naked. Momacani averted his gaze, finding that the sight held no appeal for him.

'Well, *that* was interesting.' Her voice was rough and faint, nothing like it had sounded on the other side of his skull. She sat up, cautiously acclimatising to human form.

At last relieved of his responsibility, Momacani sat down and began to rub his aching limbs. He saw no source of water near and realised they would need to go down to the lake once she was fully able to walk.

Yaotl was on her feet. She moved with the ungraceful poise of one who sleeps too deeply on a cold morning, and who still lingers a little in Ixtlilton's realm. She was dressing herself but slowly, seemingly due to being unfamiliar with this style of clothing. Momacani recalled the strange dark robes she had worn in Tlalocan.

'Don't get too comfortable.' She stood before him as a small demon the colour of a woman's milk. 'You have a dragon to slay.'

The House Meddhoran bloodline was primed with a quantity of lesser species biodata. Although it is difficult to quantify what effect this will have, Goralschai has established that it contains no conventionally biological reproductive cycle. This is good, because their function in the Quincunx will carry greater semiotic resonance in contrast to an established tradition of sterility. Had they been loomed for parturition, they might have proven more useful to the war effort, and he would not be having this conversation.

These two childrene are called Emiousha and Insoleanis, female and male respectively. The latter already wears a somewhat aged body, despite being a childe. After only a short conversation, it is not difficult to understand why the Strategists are about to write off this initiative as a lost cause. There is something wrong with them.

Emiousha and Insoleanis both recall House Paradox, its flight from the Homeworld and subsequent rebirth as the Faction, but only as an abstraction. Goralschai tells them he has secured access to the technology which facilitated the Faction's escape and - more significantly - the construction of the alter-time structures within which the cultists took refuge.

He tells them that he is sympathetic to their cause.

Having become resigned to a somewhat limited future as weapons biomass, the childrene have no cause as such, but they appear keen. All fifteen are in the air gallery for his proposal. Insoleanis is concerned, cautious of ending up in a place resembling the Eleven-Day Empire.

The technology is related but the Nemontemi is different. Goralschai explains this, telling them that Earth has numerous variant calendars in different states of disarray with asynchronous gaps everywhere. The Nemontemi comprise days excised from a relatively obscure calendar developed in a pre-technological culture on the other side of the planet. He offers an assurance that that no time-active power is likely to find them.

Emiousha tells Insoleanis that the Eleven-Day Empire is structured according to the cultural information of its occupants. She is certain that House Meddhoran will come up with something a little less overwrought. Unconvinced, Insoleanis mutters about buildings of bone and every doorway a bodily orifice. He does not believe he would enjoy living in such a place and says that he would find it depressing.

Goralschai says there will be bodily orifice doorways only if Insoleanis wants them, and that he would not presume to anticipate anyone's

preferences regarding decor.

Emiousha, who is after all the Kithriarch of the chapterhouse, asks how soon this can be done. Insoleanis appears glad that the offer has been accepted despite his reservations.

Goralschai promises that the work can be completed without the knowledge of any of his consociates from House Xianthellipse in under two housedays, providing he is granted full and uninterrupted access to their breeding engine. This is the request that could break the deal. Even these mongrels must surely see that he has overreached himself. There is silence as he waits for the inevitable objection.

In that moment he studies their faces, one after the other. Their eyes are dull, like those of animals. They stare back with terrible innocence, and it occurs to him that their devouring need, their hideous trust is more terrifying than anything witnessed on the front, or even in the realm of the Celestis. He feels compelled to get away and to place a great distance between himself and these childrene, but as ever he stays to do that which must be done.

The moment passes.

He realises there will be no objection and they are waiting for him to tell them what to do.

10.1 (east)

The ixihtec was, in Nahua thought, the quality and properties of a person or an object, or an animal or even an idea, an intangible essence which could be transmitted through proximity. It was, Primo supposed, the basis of that which would generally be dismissed as sympathetic magic, but which was presently working just fine for himself and a few others regardless of what Albert Einstein or Isaac Newton may have had to say on the subject. He had been around some unusual people and found himself in extraordinary situations these last few days, so it perhaps should have been less surprising that he had assimilated some of their characteristics. This however, this remote sense of tidal forces deep below the Earth, this had come out of the blue.

Sleep was one place, the waking world another, and all around the periphery rock flowed in a liquid state for which he no longer had a name; rock as hot as the noon sun, an impossible union of fire and water flowing from the summits of mountains, Popocatepetl, Xicco, Xitle and others. It was moving below the ground, even below Tlalocan, restless and angry, the tempest; the world was only a crust formed during a moment of calm in a trough between waves the size of creation.

This had come from the woman Yaotl. He could not bring himself to use the name she had taken so as to pass for human. She had done something to him back in Coatlinchan, something serious, something so bright he was unable to look at it directly. She had taken something from the world because that was her work, something that left idols of different Goddesses in its absence. She had gone against the sun, against the harmony of the world, against nature.

The smell of morning dew blooming upon charcoal stubs of ocote caressed Primo's nostrils, damp earth and the stale tang of the underworld. He opened his eyes, savouring the cool, dank air after the infernal heat far below. The torches had gone out. He had fallen asleep with his head on a roll of material torn from Gedarra's stage costume, her *peignoir* as she called it, or appeared to call it in a language that may have been different to that which he heard.

'Pyrhentana has left the gestalt.' She was in his face, blanched pale as bones in the sun. This was the most terrible thing in the world, apparently. 'I have lost my thread to the house.'

I hate when that happens would not have helped so Primo said nothing, sitting up, silently communicating the hopefully universal body language of someone requiring a few moments to process such unusual information.

Gedarra spoke no further, so he began to gather up some of the debris of their exercise, the bottles and materials which would require geographical ages before returning to the soil. An accretion of soot on the roof of the cave showed that others had been here before, doubtless each making their own pilgrimage to Tlalocan.

'I'm hungry now.' He considered the woman and decided that she had heard, had understood, and was probably herself also hungry. He nodded in the general direction of the rest of the universe and turned, heading for the forest beyond the cave mouth. 'Come on.'

They walked back down towards Río Frío de Juárez.

Today felt a little warmer and the fog had cleared, returning only intermittently as the east wind herded stray cumulus clouds up over the mountains towards the valley. As they left the cover of the conifers, scuffing through overgrown meadows of dew, it seemed that even the sky was brighter, the bird song sweeter and voiced with more enthusiasm.

'The travelling vehicles have ceased.' Gedarra's first words since they left the cave, and her face no longer had that look of an animal caught in the headlights of oncoming traffic. It was a strange observation, peculiar that such a detail should have penetrated all those onion layers of culture shock, or whatever it was that had stolen her voice.

She was right. The ordinarily ubiquitous urban ocean, the white noise of a million petrol engines crawling across the landscape, was silent. This would be down to a combination of factors, some religious holiday unknown to Primo and exclusive to Huexotzinco becalming the roads, or a quirk of geological acoustics, sound bouncing from the clouds and that sort of thing. There were other more far fetched explanations that might not be quite so far fetched under present circumstances, but it seemed potentially unproductive to worry about them just yet.

As they walked, the sight of the valley niggled at him. Something was wrong, something lacking, but it would make sense once they were beyond the next outcrop of trees. He'd already made his pick from the menu of some hypothetical eating place in the town, and it was just a matter of getting there.

'Tell me about the brujo.' This would hopefully bring her out of herself, use up some time.

Gedarra made a noise, something beyond clear interpretation, a hybrid of sigh and groan prefixing her halting response. 'He represented House Xianthellipse. I do not know very much.'

'You know more than I do.'

'He seeded House Meddhoran, built our bloodline with some help. Now I wonder whether this was all towards some ulterior purpose which is soon to be revealed.'

Primo already knew the answer, but decided he would ask in any case. 'You are unfamiliar with the New Fire Ceremony that was once held in this region?

Of course she was, so he explained how every fifty-two years the Nahua calendar would cycle back around to its beginning, necessitating a ceremony by which time itself was renewed. The Mexica version of this ceremony, and the only legitimate version so far as the Mexica saw it, quite naturally involved the sacrifice of a young man representing Xiuhtecuhtli, the God of Fire and the Passage of Time. It was a fairly straightforward idea: there being no such thing as a free lunch, the universe required blood in order that it should endure, and so the Gods, as always, allowed themselves to be given up in sacrifice and so became mortal, requiring that humanity should in turn provide their sustenance. As a design for life, it wasn't such a terrible principle; certainly better than crossing your fingers and hoping that the next generation will have developed some means of spiriting away all your environmental screw ups.

'This ceremony,' - it was now clear that Gedarra had given the subject her full attention - 'it is for the purpose of killing a God, this ceremony for which we saw preparation down in Tlalocan?'

Primo considered this. 'Yes, but it is important to remember that much of the ceremony serves to redefine the victim as an aspect of the God. Otherwise you end up sacrificing an ordinary person, which misses the point and falls short of the demands of the occasion.'

She regarded him with a steady eye, considering his testimony. People as a rule had trouble reconciling human sacrifice with a culture which had nevertheless produced great art and provided loving homes for its children. Perhaps those on Gedarra's Homeworld took a different, more pragmatic view. 'So the primary purpose of the ceremony is to incarnate a God?'

Primo had overlooked the significance of this idea amongst all the details and symbol. The information troubled him, and it took another moment for him to fully see it: whilst he understood only some of the

mechanism, Fire in the Serpent - or whatever he was called - had orchestrated this entire situation, the proverbial organising spider at the centre of a web written across the face of Mexica history in great knotted skeins of cause and effect. The exercise smacked of ritual, and quite specifically Nahua ritual, and even more specifically culminating in an event wherein a human victim was symbolically reborn as the God of Fire and the Passage of Time. That was the purpose. That was what this all was about.

'Rewriting the cosmos so as to create conditions by which one may become a God.'

Gedarra shed him a stern glance signifying that he had, against intention, spoken this last part out loud. In that moment he recognised all that lay before them.

The grass thinned on either side of a road, straight as any that had once led to Rome, stretching from one reach of the mountain pass to the other, cobbles of red volcanic stone, *tezontli* as the Mexica had called it; as they perhaps called it even *now*. This was, he saw from the tree line further up the hill, the place where Río Frío de Juárez would one day be built. Considering the conspicuous absence of traffic noise, this development should not have come as such a surprise. Primo stared west along the neat red strip sparking an incongruous memory of the yellow brick road in *The Wizard of Oz*.

All of the past and the future are to be found in the underworld.

'This is not as it was before.' Gedarra stepped onto the road, searching along its length for something familiar. 'I would imagine this is not an ordinary situation.'

'I think it may be that this actually *is* as it was before, but in terms of years rather than days.' He wasn't going to use the word *centuries*until the fact of it lay beyond possibility of denial.

They began to walk, heading west. Now that the notion of a significantly different landscape had been introduced, the differences leapt out at them, so stark and obvious that it seemed strange that they could have thus far gone unnoticed. The approach of a group of figures coming from the far end of the road did not even register for the first minute, at least not until they were so near as to allow the strangeness of their dress to become apparent, cotton shawls knotted at one shoulder, each carrying a tall staff ornately carved at the head and with sandals worn upon their feet.

'I have seen him.' Gedarra was staring, her eyesight clearly sharper than

that of any human.

Primo decided he wasn't even going to ask. There was no longer anything to be had from rationalising this situation. They continued towards the group - the *Pochteca*, he realised - wandering traders who crossed great distances and sometimes served as spies. He recognised the staff of the office from *Codex Fejervary-Mayer*, although this group lacked the traditional carrying frames worn upon their backs and laden with goods bound for sale in regional towns.

Perhaps they were something else, some other branch of the Pochteca guild.

They met, the two and the four assessing each other. The eldest trader spoke first, a bold, wide native face with piercing eyes set far apart.

'My name is Icnopilli.' He glanced at Gedarra, a flicker of curiosity, either her complexion or maybe this was the one she claimed to have recognised. 'I welcome you to Anahuac for the bounty and grandeur of Lord Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin.'

He bowed low, arcing his hand as though throwing something back across one shoulder. The others echoed the formality.

'You were expecting us. You knew we would come.' Primo's thoughts raced, calculations and estimations, and surprise at how little any of this surprised him. 'This is 1507,' - he caught himself, knowing this date would mean nothing. 'This is the year Two Reed - *Ome Acatl*.'

'Ce Tochtli.' Icnopilli's correction contained no intimation of his considering this a strange conversation. 'You are one year early. It is presently One Rabbit - *Ce Tochtli*; and yes, it is true that we were expecting you.'

10.2 (north)

Running from north-east San Antonio all the way down to the Spanish missions in the south of the city, Salado Creek was, for much of the year, unconnected pools strung along the limestone bed of a dry river like beads on a necklace, alternately home to turtles, snakes, fish, herons, and clouds of dragonflies. People would forget it was there until rain came to swell the trickle to a fast flowing river, swallowing up miles of flood plain with great lakes that would be gone within days.

Coughing gouts of filthy water, Todd clawed himself up onto a bank of cold, grey stones washed smooth by the passage of time, muscles

screaming in the wake of his escape from the drowned vehicle. He could hear panting, a hot little doggy tongue rough against his face, and he was cold, shivering. Memories came together, stumbling into one another like drunks - the cop who would be Hector, the city that wasn't really a city, and his car hitting the water, going under.

He opened stinging eyes and tried to reconcile the mist and cold with the flood plains of Salado Creek. How long had he been down there, below the waves?

'Take it easy. You'll be okay in a moment or two.'

A calming voice from a tiny throat: the Chihuahua that had come back from the dead to serve for his spirit guide. Somehow, against all odds, he'd forgotten *that* detail.

'Cold.'

'Well, yeah, you would be. We're in the underworld, the northern edge of Tlalocan bordering the Realm of the Fleshless.'

'Mictlan.'

Nails skittered upon stone. 'It seems I was right about your yolia, which would be the reason we washed up here rather than Apan in the east of Tlalocan.'

Todd rolled over, collapsing onto his back. He tried to say *whatever.*

Face continued, taking the noise for a question. 'Apan is the resting place of the drowned, but I'd guess your soul needs its missing third, so it's brought us here.'

Todd's mouth tasted of stomach acid and freezing water. He lay still as possible, shutting out the excited chittering of his nagual. He tried to breath, slow and deep, ignoring the stones and rocks jabbing him in the ass. They were on the bank of a huge, fast flowing river. All was grey, indistinct below a sky of burnt sienna which had resolved itself into the ceiling of a cavern the size of the world. They really *were* in Tlalocan.

'Can you stand?' The dog skittered around, tail wagging for no real reason.

'I guess.' He struggled to his feet, aching but oddly fortified by the effort. He rubbed his eyes then his face, clearing grit and crap that had dried onto his skin. His mother had told him all about Mictlan, but he'd never really taken too much notice. It really *was* like Padre Island.

'We need to cross.'

Todd gazed over the river to the bank opposite, taking comfort from the thought that even after all he'd seen there were still things that could freak him out: the waters raged, and yet there was a dog, much large than Face, pointed ears and a tail like a whip. It was one of those hairless Mexican dogs the Indians used to breed, yellow as a banana and walking upon the water.

Something wrapped itself around his ankle and tugged, a child's hand. Todd yelped, falling forward. He grabbed a rock and beat at the wrist as something huge extended from out of the mist, clutching at him and groaning with a voice made of distant traffic and reality TV. Hector, snarled as he smashed the dolls together promising *this is what I'm going to do to you*; then it was the cop, all those traffic violations in the eye of the beholder. The thing was a giant, its form shifting with each step - small boy, car parts, dogs, fences, bridges, rivers, Justin, Selena watching television, pyramidal skyscrapers, an entire city pretending to be whatever it took to bring him in. This was, Todd realised, what his life looked like from the outside.

He pounded with the rock, breaking tiny fingers. Hector's eyes welled up with the tears of Victorian orphans on Hallmark greeting cards. *Why are you doing this?*

'Give me a fucking break, man!' Todd scrabbled backwards like a roach, stumbling to his feet. The yellow dog stood before him, supported against all expectation about a yard from the bank. It looked worried as it spoke raw, guttural syllables. 'I would suggest you cross now.'

The Chihuahua was already half way to the opposite bank, skittering upon the roaring waves and foam, head turned and yapping, something that sounded like *Saint Anthony*.

He stepped out onto the water, feeling it mobile but somehow firm through the soles of his sneakers. He took a second step, then broke into a run as the monstrosity approached, raising the hairs on the back of his neck. The yellow dog barked and snarled, defending its river as Saint Anthony rose up with a roar of static electricity, forming itself into an episode of *Animal Cops San Antonio*. It advanced anew, bull terriers and starving horses trapped in the shape of a man

Todd fell onto the bank, looking back to see the canine guardian grapple the marauder, a yapping yellow David against an improbable Goliath; and yet the dog had the monstrosity at bay simply because this was his territory.

'We need to go.' Face nudged him in the side. 'We have a great distance

to travel.'

Todd recalled there being many levels to the Realm of the Fleshless, this from a bedtime story related by Doña Ultima much to his mother's displeasure, but he'd left all the detail behind with the rest of his childhood. Turning, he saw two vast mountain peaks, geological twins, just the sort of thing one would expect to see in a folk tale. He took one last look at the battle, the yellow dog biting bloody gobbets of southbound exit from Saint Anthony's access roads. The monster was something like a living holding cell pretending to be a city, just as much warped by whatever was going on with that bigger picture as Primo and himself. He guessed it would most likely have been Conti's doing. She had put him there figuring he wouldn't realise.

Now he was in some place even *further* removed from reality - like he even had the chops to make *that* sort of call. By Conti's reckoning he'd never been born, and was only able to acknowledge such a thing due to being part of this Quincunx, this thing that was happening.

The ground shook, pebbles rattling, patterns formed in the sand by a sound some way below the level of hearing. Up ahead, the mountains had smashed together like colossal jaws. Now they were moving apart in readiness for the next collision, a silent motion, slow as islands crossing the Pacific.

Todd turned back. The river had reduced to a dark line in the distance.

'Before you ask,' - Face glanced up at him, - 'time isn't bound by the sun down here, or at least not by the sun of the heavens. It tends to move around when you're not looking.'

'The sun of the heavens.' He repeated the reference, trying to make sense of it.

'The sun of the underworld is black, this being in the region of night.'

They trudged on in silence, having little to say that had not already been said. The twin mountains slammed together before them with glacial fury, about a half hour between each collision, although this was really just a guess. No wristwatch had worked for Todd prior to finding himself trapped in Conti's version of the city, and the situation was back to as it had been before. It took fifteen minutes to pass between the jaws of the crushing peaks, that is to say it took what felt roughly equivalent to his daily hike across Harry Wurzbach, down past the subdivision to JMB Restoration, or at least the daily hike on those days when he'd been low on gas or just felt he needed the exercise.

He would quite probably never again hose caustic soda from preowned furniture, he realised, and wasn't sure if he liked the idea. The strangeness of the present had stifled any thought he might have had regarding the future, and it now occurred to him that there might not be one, at least not for him.

The cut opened out ahead, the sky - or at least the subterranean heavens - now dominated by a single mountain, far larger than those they had passed and black as night, reflecting the light of the dark hypogean sun like glass. As they came nearer, sand and stones thinned to expose a hard surface beneath, solid and yet treacherous under foot, and easily identified as obsidian. They skirted the edge of the mountain, not risking the smoother, glassier inclines which might have cut time off their journey.

There were nine levels to Mictlan, although Todd wasn't so sure how he knew this, but guessed it would be something he heard when he was seven and glued to his grandmother's black and white television. The river, the mountains crashing together, and now the obsidian peak - that was three. Ahead lay the Region of Banners, the Region of Arrows, and some others, although he had no idea of the order by which they were arranged, or what to expect aside from the territory maybe getting more dangerous as they went on. This last notion wasn't from anything he specifically recalled, it just made sense. He'd only seen one *Lord of the Rings* movie, but it was enough to give him the general idea.

'We must tread carefully.' Being a Chihuahua, Face was physically disposed towards seeming a little neurotic, but now his ears lay flat and his tail had sunk between his back legs. 'This is the realm of Xochitonal.'

There was a movement up ahead, something in the mist, a motion like a snake in water as a reptilian carapace slid across the shale to meet them. The head of a crocodile rose up, jaws agape, green as the first shoots of spring. A noise rumbled from its throat, nothing like a growl or anything that could have come from a living creature, but patently hostile.

'She is the avatar of the last day-sign, the death and subsequent renewal of the cycle.' Face skipped across the rocks, scampering out of the path of the approaching demon.

'Sure she is.' Todd jumped aside, scooping the Chihuahua into his arms as a wall of green scales slid by. He knew his heart should be pounding, but some element of this situation had reduced the sense of danger to something commonplace. Perhaps that was the nature of myth, or of finding oneself inside one: with legends of this kind only ever having the usual

conclusion, all that running around in imperilled circumstances was just padding. Maybe his heart wasn't even beating because in some sense he was dead, or should be considered as such. Technically, he'd never truly been alive which was most likely the same thing.

Xochitonal rounded upon them, getting ready for a second attack.

The horizon split open behind her, disgorging a mass of tattooed bodies girded in smoke, Saint Anthony now expressed as the sum of meat grilled in all the city parks on the hottest day of the year. It roared like a thousand low riders bouncing their way down Military, beating its chest to distorted Tejano and Ranchera stations, the sound of accordions in hell. As the monstrous crocodile lunged forward, it grasped the beast with a muscular re-enactment of the Alamo, throwing it upon its back like a luchador. Todd cursed, struggling to reconcile the gravity of the situation with the fact of its resembling a Saturday morning cartoon on angel dust.

10.3 (west)

'The restoration of order?' Thraenrellis examined her own reflection in the convex surface of the amaranth as she listened to Emiousha's account of events in the air gallery. 'I do not even understand what that could mean.'

They had gathered in the nosocomion, the remaining childrene all huddling around Dorhira in her adversity, another curiously atavistic trait. The Biblarian herself, despite the loss of the neonate, was recovering, perhaps obliged to draw back from the brink of despair by the increased peril of her surrounds. She spoke now, her voice hushed and fragile.

'I have been studying the codices of the architexture, these last few housedays. I fear I have an idea of that to which the Drudge refers.'

All eyes were upon her as she sat upon the catafalque, knees up, rocking back and forth. The act appeared to bring her some comfort.

'The default state of House Meddhoran, once you get past the archemathics, now equates to cold, inertia, and to cessation of motion, which I suppose would mean death.' She paused before delivering the inevitable addendum. 'We are ourselves now something quite different, not precisely in an oppositional state, but we constitute a very clear contrast to our environment. Tecpatl is an ambulant manifestation of the Netherweald, so I think we are in trouble.'

Rothis raised a painted eyebrow at the suggestion, wandering over to where a bellum notitia had been draped across the nosocomion window.

'The Drudge wishes to,' - Emiousha fumbled for specifics - 'make us cold, inert and dead?'

'Yes, although desire plays no part.' Dorhira watched as Rothis drew back the tapestry to see outside. 'The Drudge is compelled to render us consistent with our habitat. It's a matter of thermal equilibrium rather than conscious will.'

Rothis expended a small cry of either horror or disbelief. She was faced away, looking from the mullioned glass out across the Netherweald, although the angle at which she held the improvised drape occluded that which had inspired her reaction.

Emiousha recalled her most recent excursion out into the Netherweald, the grey monolith of House Meddhoran towering above her on all four sides as space became recursive at just thirteen paces, a forest of one single repeated tree. She went to see.

Beyond Rothis she saw herself and the nosocomion interior, light returned not from mullioned glass but from their ever shrinking knot of ingrowing space. The exterior was gone. The Netherweald had reduced to just chapterhouse, the last meal in this autophagic microverse.

She has stopped us from drawing breath. She has given us our flags and our strips of paper.

The proclamation was coming to make more sense with the passing of each houseday, and for the first time Emiousha absently noticed the nominative *she* and wondered at the likelihood of Tecpatl referring to some specific individual. They had been treating this crisis as though it were some natural disaster, the unforeseen consequence of subtracting an entire chapterhouse from Homeworld continuity without due care and attention; but perhaps this was something which had been brought to term by *design*. If this were the case, the obvious questions would then be to what purpose and by whom? Despite the recent proliferation of gruesome imagery, she remained uncommitted to the idea that this could be anything to do with Faction Paradox. They simply weren't that important, and it was doubtful that they would have the means. Gedarra had referred to some elder female Cousin showing up on the other side of the flaw. It seemed entirely plausible that one of those carrion feeders would start sniffing around sooner or later, and such idle curiosity tended to rule out the possibility of any more orchestrated conspiracy.

More likely was that this situation had been wrought by House Xianthellipse, or someone from House Xianthellipse. It could even be that

this mess had been the entire point of House Meddhoran's seeding from the very beginning; but as to who had *stopped* them *from drawing breath* in some presumably figurative sense...

Academician Doloras had never shown much interest in their bloodline; and Autodidact Hester regarded the Ordnance-Tetrarch as unstable, and was unlikely to have cared enough to interfere with his work. Emiousha could recall no other significant female from their patron Great House with whom she had even shared conversation.

A taste in her mouth broke the Kithriarch's train of thought, blood on the tip of her finger as she probed, idly gazing at her own mirror image. Laethynrisa had already experienced this stage, she knew. It was of no consequence.

'We cannot stay here.'

Their talk had been all the while scored to the leaden footfalls of Tecpatl making its way down from the air gallery. No Drudge had ever been quite so slow and it seemed reasonable to assume that the Netherweald was having some trouble animating its avatar.

Dorhira shuffled forward from the catafalque, setting her feet to the floor. 'We could go to the catacomb. The breeding engine will keep us safe and secure, I am sure.'

Nobody felt inclined to point out that with nine childrene now dead, the Biblarian's faith seemed misplaced. Furthermore, the twine which Emiousha had left to mark the ever-shifting location of the catacomb was gone from the balustrade to which it had been secured.

The resulting silence served as an evaluation of Dorhira's suggestion.

The Kithriarch looked over to Laethynrisa. The childe's abdomen had grown enormous, expanding to accommodate the neonate within. Whilst this was hardly Emiousha's area of expertise, she doubted parturition advanced at quite such a pace amongst those species still prone to this means of reproduction. 'Are you able to move?'

'Of course.'

'We will head to the lower levels, regardless of what is down there. It will take Tecpatl some while to reach us, and we may in that time devise a solution.' Pain behind her eyes and damp cooling upon her upper lip, Emiousha put a hand to her face and found a crimson flash of blood, then a memory returned in response to some obscure realisation.

She went out onto the landing.

Laethynrisa came after her, offering a cloth to stem the bleeding. 'It was the same for me.'

Emiousha dabbed at her face, looking over the walls, splintered planks where once there had been finely rendered designs upon lignite amalgam, and *more*: the gateway that she and Rothis had quite recently dragged close, imprisoning a creature with wooden doors set into its chest.

'Thraenrellis, you saw us...'

The Ecclesiast emerged from the nosocomion, supporting Dorhira who still appeared somewhat unsteady, at last followed by Rothis.

Emiousha made a second attempt at her point. 'The creature of omen, it was called the Youaltepoztli. We trapped it within the cabinet space just here.'

'I see no cabinet space.' Laethynrisa moved across the landing, touching the wall, clearly more troubled by this fresh architectural discrepancy.

The implication was difficult to miss. In a desperate effort to sustain itself, the chapterhouse had devoured its own technological progression, its environment, *possibly* half of its bloodline, and had now begun upon its own interior structure, perhaps *even* some of the more vestigial loops of continuity within that structure. A warning - if indeed that's what the Youaltepoztli had been - could be repeated and was therefore of negligible value as a point of historical interest whilst the threat remained.

Tecpatl stamped across the landing immediately above.

'Make haste *now*.' The Kithriarch pushed the childrene along, hands upon the shoulders of Dorhira then Thraenrellis, urging them down the steps. Something caught her eye, a red creature crawling along the rim of the balustrade with slow deliberation, the pace of an animal at leisure. She recalled that Tecpatl had referred to this omen as a pinauiztli beetle.

'Gather yourselves together.' She hustled Rothis and Laethynrisa before her. 'Make haste.'

The five of them descended to the next landing, turning and then down once again. At the fourth such turn they found the ingress of the athenæum, the door onto a vertiginous archipelago of shelving, bloated peninsulae of wood and paper blooming out to fill a central space far bigger than the Netherweald had ever been. If the chapterhouse was truly consuming itself, the athenæum remained for the moment unaffected, although it had not escaped Emiousha's notice that between here and the nosocomion they had lost a floor. Five levels had reduced to four.

This was in at least one sense positive: if they could deduce which level was to be next on the menu, they might deduce an appropriate place to lure the marauding Tecpatl and let the process dispose of him.

Emiousha looked up. The floors above trembled with heavy clay footsteps.

'Down. Hurry!'

The childrene fussed onwards, resuming their descent, nervous glances stolen back up towards the air gallery, then at once focussed by a scream.

Thraenrellis was held suspended at the next landing, feet hanging down from bands of brittle white stone threaded around her body. She struggled and tried to push herself free, to access the tactile switches that would prime the amaranth.

Not stone, the Kithriarch realised, *bones!* An immense skeletal hand had reached into the chapterhouse to pluck a childe free as though they were all dolls within the contrivance of some playful gargantua; of all the indignities they had endured, this seemed the most ridiculous.

In a moment the Ecclesiast was gone along with the ludicrously speckled extremity which had effected her abduction, her scream cut short leaving not even so much as an echo. There was too much happening here, too many elements to consider...

The childrene cried, the three of them which remained, haring back up the steps towards Tecpatl, tripping over one another like startled herd animals. A giant stood before them on the landing, headless and with a hide like cured leather.

Clack... clack... clack...

The Kithriarch felt, for the first time in her brief existence, the overwhelming urge to punch someone, to really break a few bones. Without consistent rules, this was less than even a grotesque game: that stupid, mindless obscenity stood there upon the landing blocking their retreat; which had somehow *always* been stood there upon the landing. Just what was the point of an omen that was in all likelihood *at least* as dreadful as the hypothetical doom it foretold?

Emiousha flew at the Youaltepoztli, her voice torn from her throat by fury, a war cry spat out in a language she had no recollection of learning, something beyond semiosis.

She would turn the tide on this thing. She knew this with absolute certainty.

Clack... clack... clack...

She reached into the creature's yawning chest cavity...

10.4 (south)

We need to find a cave, Yaotl had told him. *More or less any cave will do. I should think they all lead to the same place by now.*

So, having briefly responded to their thirst with the waters of Lake Chalco, they returned to the town of Xicco with the intention of crossing back to the mainland. Momacani had cleaned himself, although still appeared so far removed from anyone who could ever be considered the living Ixiptla of a God that he did not consider the possibility of being seen and recognised by any agent of the court of Tenochtitlan; and whilst representatives of that authority indeed failed to spot him as the two of them passed through the market square of the town, they could hardly miss the freakish foreign noblewoman with skin the hue of a moon person.

Luckily, in building for herself a body, she had not forgotten to include that talent for the independent and defensive movement of her shadow, again somehow effecting to injure a foe with what was only the *impression* of some sharp and pointed weapon, a blade lacking material substance in the physical realm. The pair of them, slowing only to snatch food for their sustenance from an unfortunate trader who received no payment, fled from the town, heading back the way they came along the curved shoreline of the island. At the southern reach of the great crater they came to a second, more modest causeway which they followed to the mainland before vanishing into the woodlands of Ayotzinco.

'Do you think we have been followed?' Momacani stood with his back against a tree in the shade away from the view of anyone who might happen along the bank of the lake. He was struggling to regain his breath and still suffering from noon spent still as an idol in the heat of the sun. Yaotl, by contrast did not seem lacking in either energy or stamina, contrary to what might be suggested by the physique she had recently taken for herself.

'I wouldn't be surprised, but it hardly matters. I'm hoping we'll be done with this shortly, then we can get you back to Huixachtepetl for your big performance.'

She had an unusual manner of speaking, a turn of phrase that suggested her words were only poorly translated into Nahuatl.

'Now let's see to that prophecy, shall we?'

He caught his breath, looking around, collating an imaginary map of the land, where it would rise towards Teuhtlan and those towns further south, where they might profitably gain entrance to the world below and so on. 'We seek my beast of the city, and yet we are heading away from the Valley where most cities are to be found, and Cuauhnahuac is yet a long way from here.'

'Well, whatever that means, I've managed to identify your Atepexolotl for you, which is actually why we're here. I thought you realised.'

Momacani regarded the pale woman, still not convinced that he fully understood.

'You can explain on the way.'

He turned and began walking south, deeper into woodland with conspicuous purpose in his step. The forest canopy meanwhile exploded with the whooping of some forest animal, many bodies racing to put a distance between themselves and these intruders.

Yaotl cast a doubtful eye up towards the treetops, then began to follow. 'In another country, and another chapter of the calendar there is a dead boy, the elder of two brothers to whom I made some effort to provide aid. Like yourself he was greatly afflicted by the sacred, as I believe local argot would have it.'

'There is much affliction of such a nature these days, I would say.'

'There certainly is. It's the times we live in,' - she chuckled to herself. 'Well, *you* live in.'

Momacani hefted himself up a grassy bank inspiring a commotion in the nearby undergrowth, most likely an armadillo he decided. 'Continue.'

'I've been trying to help the dead boy, and his brother for that matter, but they're hardly the most appreciative of clients. Anyway, the point is that for his own safety I had to imprison the dead boy.'

The former Ixtilli peered through the trees ahead to patches of bright sunlight. He could not be sure whether the woman was making up this tale or not. Some element of its telling suggested a hidden dimension, that she was exercising caution, withholding those details which might show her in an unfavourable light; but then she was the demon Yaotl, one of the more poisonous aspects of Tezcatlipoca, so he really had no good cause to find this surprising.

'By what means did you imprison him? From your words I infer that this

is significant.'

'I suppose you would say I trapped him within a dream, a dream of his own home which for a time he believed to be real.'

'So being content he was unaware of the walls which held him.'

'Very good. I can see why they had you in that secret service of yours.'

Turning to help the woman climb the bank, Momacani saw that she had already made the ascent and so continued on towards the clearing.

She continued. 'Anyway, somehow his,' - a pause as though unsure of the correct term - 'his *spirit guide* got in there with him, or he imagined it into being or somesuch, and he escaped, and is loose down there in Tlalocan even as we speak.'

'Of course, that was where first I saw you. Strange that only now I should remember.'

'The dream, specifically his dream of a city in which he once lived, formed itself into a creature, and that is your beast of the city, the Atepexolotl.'

The clearing was small but with a sheer rock face at one side, sandstone surmounted by a cap of greenery on high. The air was cooling after the heat of the day, stilling the humid woodland with its mosquitoes and biting things, and the grass felt soft and satisfying at their feet. Both stood before a cave set low in the wall of the cliff, a triangular aperture of a size that would conceal a child but no personage of greater stature.

Momacani expected some announcement, the initiation of the next stage of their noble plan, but none came. Yaotl slumped to the ground to watch the cave, apparently exhausted for the first time. It was borne in upon the Ixtilli that she did not appear particularly evil, or even necessarily prone to deception. If anything she seemed only like a woman of an age that would have children recently grown and studying at Calmecac, at least were it not for her unearthly pallor.

He had heard of those who followed Gods of a somewhat more polar caste, who believed in supernaturals of absolute evil or near infinite virtue, and he had always felt a little sorry for those who lived in such black and white realms. It seemed more proper that even the most benign Deity might become like a devil when the mood took them; and conversely the darkest and lowest of demons might on occasion commit great good for no reason other than that they were by nature capricious. This did not seem to him a difficult idea to understand.

He had regarded Yaotl as a demon, and one of the worst, but perhaps today was as much a good day for her as for anyone. He performed a swift calculation - Chicome Cozcacuauhtli or *Seven Vulture* as presided over by Itzpapalotl, the flint butterfly; yes, it was indeed a good day.

'Yaotl, I must tell you that I do not know why I am here. I am no wiser than that day in Xochimilco when first you spoke your words to me.'

She looked up at him, bags below her eyes. 'In what sense?'

'I do not know why I am here. All these years I have wondered what the Atepexolotl might be, and I *still* do not understand why I have forsaken the comfort of Tenochtitlan in order to make war against this creature that has done me no harm. I see no purpose here beyond the fulfilment of a mystifying prophecy. This is a story which happens for no reason, I would say.'

Suddenly exhausted, he too sat upon the grass, laying back to look up at the sky.

Yaotl conceded a sigh. 'My stupid fault I'm afraid.'

'I do not understand. Why is it your stupid fault?'

'Because I shouldn't be here and I'm an idiot.' The fire had gone from her, and she spoke as though making confession, and in doing so sounded entirely human for perhaps the first time. 'I am, you might say, a wild card or an unpredictable element.'

'You are Yaotl.' It seemed self evident to Momacani.

'There is a great scheme in progress, a puzzle formed from many interlocking parts. You are yourself one of those parts. I am not, so my involvement has introduced what you might call flaws, one of which seems to be your prophecy, and the fact of us waiting here to clean up*my* mess.'

'Your mess?'

'The Atepexolotl as you call it lost my dead boy, but from what I can tell, he's tracking him and is coming here, which is going to cause major problems.'

'The dead boy is here?'

'No, but apparently he will be in three days time, so I imagine that would be something to do with the New Fire Ceremony, an event upon which, I need hardly remind you, there seems to be rather a lot hanging. It turns out that part of your destiny, largely thanks to me I'm afraid, is to destroy the Atepexolotl so as to save the world and all that good stuff.'

Head ringing from the convoluted logic, Momacani watched a creature emerge from the cave, formless, yet resembling a giant, the shape of a man made from dusty roads and cacti growing in the ruins of stepped pyramids, arms of great stone columns carved to resemble warriors.

The moment was gone.

They were in a square, in a town somewhere in the northern desert. The edge of the square was defined by a low wall beyond which were rows of brick and adobe buildings and a few of cruder form, no more than wooden huts. The sun wheeled backwards through the sky, history resolving to an earlier form, happier times, the substance of legend.

The woman became still more pale. 'Oh shit.'

Momacani shook his head, disappointed. 'We are inside the creature, wouldn't you say? It has made of us prisoners just as it held the dead boy you were telling me about.'

Yaotl's fire had relented to exhaustion and now her confidence followed a similarly dispirited path. She had gone to the limit of her map and fallen from the edge. 'Where is this? It's not Tenochtitlan.'

Momacani turned left and then right, recognising at last the Temple of the Morning Star, although in *his* day it was a ruin. 'We are in Tollan that is the capitol of the Toltecs, the city that was burned; or more properly we are, I suppose, in a dream of Tollan as a result of your sorcery.'

'Oh shit.'

The streets began to flow with people, those who had perished many years before Momacani first set foot upon the soil of Mexico

He wondered how he could be expected to wage war on an entire city.

10.5

Goralschai approaches the cave entrance with caution. It is the year 1375 by the planet's most widely used calendar, Thirteen Reed*by the local count, his understanding of the distinction aided greatly by the cultural material transposed from Water Sun.*

The crude appearance of the indigenous hominids makes it clear that he is presently a long way from the front. They are draped in cloaks of a woven fabric, tied about the neck and dyed with bold geometric designs. Some wear thin shirts of cotton, loin cloths or skirts of similar material. Many sport ceremonial ornamentation of one kind or another, gold,

jadeite, or coral clustered about ears, wrists, even noses and lips.

The one man introduces him as being known by a name that sounds almost *like Goralschai, announcing that he is a healer who has travelled a great distance. This latter detail being true, Goralschai responds so as to reinforce other assumptions, noting how protocols derived from the Faction memecore twist the unfolding narrative to his will. To this end, introduced to Acamapichtli, he finds himself performing the traditional greeting - a bow to mime a handful of dirt from the ground tossed over his back - an entirely natural gesture rendered without thought.*

Acamapichtli bears a wound at the base of his spine which will not heal. Supernaturalists allied to a rival city across the lake are suspected. Goralschai makes an inspection and announces that he will administer the means of his recovery. He takes a biodata sampler and fits it over the knuckles of one hand, inspiring fear. These people regard him as a sorcerer, but appear to believe that whatever treatment he applies will in effect fight fire with fire.

Acamapichtli regards the row of needles with apparent indifference and says that the Tecpanecs would rather see the Mexica as chichimec mercenaries than heirs to a Toltec bloodline. This is an oblique reference to whatever quirk of regional politics has made it necessary for the ruler to hide in a cave. This is of no interest to Goralschai.

Taking Acamapichtli by the arm, he notices scar tissue on the ruler's calf - the signature of penitential acts, bloodletting performed with thorns or sharp splinters of volcanic glass. He punches the needles in just below the shoulder.

Acamapichtli makes no sound, although his face betrays surprise as great swathes of his history are extracted, copied, and replaced. A moment later it is over. It seems unlikely that the human can have fully understood what has been done. He examines the marks left upon his arm as a red bead of blood grows from each tiny puncture. He appears satisfied

Goralschai performs a second bow assuming it to be appropriate. He looks around at the others of the group, noting their approval. Over near the cave entrance, blood dries upon a small stone representation of a seated God whom one of the group identifies as Patecatl, a supernatural figure associated with medicine. So far as these Mexica are concerned, Goralschai is here due to the observance of some rite centred upon the idol. Being as he can already feel the first stirrings of the Quincunx, he assumes this to be true in some sense.

He exits the cave. His work done, the group have moved on to discussion of Acamapichtli's inauguration.

An owl sits in the branches of a tree growing in the bank of earth below the cave entrance. Goralschai makes a closer inspection and realises that it is something other than an owl.

Large yellow eyes return his gaze, unblinking. He is unable to identify the true nature of the creature, even whether it is biological in constitution. This is a mystery, but then his work is only started, and doubtless all will emerge as clear when the Quincunx begins to insinuate itself into the weave of local spacetime.

11.1 (east)

There is the world we see, and there is the world beyond, the realm of sacred forces. Each is different to the other, but there are points at which they meet, where crossings are made. Lakes, rivers, and caves - these are dangerous places at the periphery of common experience, regions where one may glimpse the mechanism of the cosmos. The cavernous shrine mounted at the summit of a temple platform is another such place, albeit one purposefully formed of human architecture. It is a point of access to the sacred, a dangerous region even for those priests trained from childhood in the ways by which one communes with those who made the world.

Primo Acamapichtli Isleño de la Vega stood at the foot of the steps gazing up as volutes of thick, black smoke billowed from the maw of the shrine, willing himself to find concordance with the maps he knew from his books. Far above, the centre of the platform was dominated by a monolith, a huge basalt replica of Chalchihuitlicue, the River Goddess. It was identical to the one which would be found in San Miguel Coatlinchan in about five-hundred years time, and was therefore as close to impossible as made little difference. To left and right, a few hundred yards either side stood temple platforms dedicated respectively to Centeotl and Xipe Totec. This one was a substitution for what Primo knew with absolute certainty should have stood in its place, shrine to a Goddess, something to do with those currents boiling away beneath the land. The names, the ideas were almost there, still slipping from his grasp each time he thought upon them.

Running along the distant horizon, visible just beyond Tenochtitlan's jigsaw skyline, were the mountains, snow-capped with smoke trailing the peak to the south. This meant something.

Noon approached and the sun had begun to cook the flagstones of the great ceremonial square. From the summit of another temple, attendants sounded their conch horns, raising dust and smoke from the shrine. A group of children were crossing, heading towards the calmecac building, a giggling crocodile of cotton cloaks and cloth bundles held tightly in small hands.

The Pochteca called Icnopilli spoke, patient but eager to hustle the group along. 'Your journey is near done. You may take your rest soon.'

Gedarra's eyes drew focus, an unspoken question waiting on Primo's cue. It would be those same questions which had already been answered on

the road coming down from the mountains, and then again when they had spent the night billeted in Texcoco: *yes* they were honoured guests, and *no* they weren't at liberty. The notion that these conceits might contradict each other belonged to that distant world of telenovelas and gated communities; it had no place here and Primo was untroubled by this fact. This was where they were both supposed to be.

The Pochteca escort led them to a long low building set to one side of the Templo Mayor, the largest temple of the square, an immense stone block some five or six storeys by the terms of that which would one day be built upon its ruin, fires blazing at the summit and two crenelated shrines set side by side. Primo drank it all in. These shrines were dedicated to Tlaloc the Rain God and to Huitzilopochtli, the saviour of the Mexica race, the latter demarcated by a deep slash of crimson: human blood baked and flaking under hot sun reaching almost to the lowest step. This was the architectural axis upon which the Mexica universe turned, and it was the most beautiful thing Primo had ever seen.

'Be careful that your eyes do not fall out and so bruise your tongue.' Icnopilli, after two inscrutable days, was at last amused. 'I would say that you have an understanding, that you see clearly and with a polished eye.'

And he did.

Primo saw Huitzilopochtli leading his people from out of Aztlan, no longer as a tale set down upon bark paper, but as the actual events upon which Mexico, *his* Mexico, had been established. The Hummingbird God had been just a man, and he had brought his people through the wilderness to found this city. He was a hero in the fullest sense of the word, and of course like all heroes, it had been necessary to destroy him, or *would be* necessary to destroy him within a matter of decades. The Christians needed their Devil as much as they needed their God.

This was the distinction that people failed to grasp, whining about the beauty and violence of the Mexica as though the two might somehow be separate. The blood *was* the beauty, the blood was life and nature itself - something to which the human race had subjected a great ocean of denial, imagining itself above such visceral truisms. No wonder the planet would end up in such a mess. The one culture where something of genuine worth had been built and it would be crushed within the lifetime of the generation most recently born. The Mexica had feared that the Gods would die without the sustenance that was their due, and so the world would end; and perhaps it had.

A hand settled upon his shoulder, Icnopilli indulging his private

moment. 'We really must get you to the compound. You will eat, and then your thoughts will become all the more clear.'

Primo glanced at Gedarra knowing there was nothing he could tell her that she would understand.

Inside the building, they were taken to an inner courtyard with an ornamental pond beneath a square of open sky. This was to be their home for the remainder of the day. They were to enjoy delicacies, Icnopilli explained, making it additionally clear that refusal of this hospitality was not an option. Squashes were brought forth, cooked with chillis and strips of some meat that was probably duck, then cups of fruit juice and water flavoured with aniseed.

'I believe we have been brought here by the Quincunx. We are both component elements, and its increasing semiotic gravity may have drawn us from Tlalocan.' Gedarra munched upon her food without any obvious sign of pleasure.

Primo recalled using the term *Quincunx* to describe the ritual undertaking of this brujo, this Ordnance-Tetrarch Goralschai. The term referred to the cross denoting the five directions: east, north, west, south, and centre. It was as good a name as any and he nodded to show that he agreed with her assessment of the situation. Maybe they would *all* show up, Todd Calavero and the *other* one. Icnopilli and the Pochteca - or whatever the hell they *really* were - had spent much of the long, long walk back to Tenochtitlan discussing some fugitive of apparently sacred qualities most recently sighted near Ayotzinco, someone presently undergoing a complex rite by which he would become all the more heroic and therefore all the more valuable a sacrifice.

Primo's initial thought had been of whether he had heard of Ayotzinco and where it might be; in turn prompting him to ponder over the point at which ritual killing had ceased to bother him, then whether it had *ever* bothered him.

'Please relate to me of your considerations.' Gedarra had finished eating and now drank from a clay cup with red tessellations painted about the rim. 'I am concerned with your silence.'

'I'm fine.' Primo was niggled, reminding himself that this woman wasn't even human and was in no position to pass comment.

Fire and water: the idea that was too big to consider now returned to him. There had been no temple dedicated to the River Goddess in that part of the ceremonial square. Just like the idol Doña Ultima had dug up from

her yard, a substitution had been made, an entire group of Gods and Goddesses excised from the pantheon, something to do with how he could watch smoke rise from a distant mountain and have no idea what it meant: something that burned overwritten with water symbols. Water and fire combined signified *atlachinolli*, an explosive union of opposing forces, sacred war in Nahua terms. Maybe he was overthinking this.

'Gedarra, if I have an idea,' - he struggled to force the thoughts into a sentence. This was strangely humiliating. 'If I have an idea, and the idea by some means ceases to exist, how can it be that it never existed?'

'There was a weapon developed on the Homeworld which could strip entire concepts from a culture, pulling them out at the root. I would say you are referring to such a device.'

He took a moment to roll this around inside his head. 'And?'

'And that is as much as I know. Many weapons were developed on the Homeworld.' She set down the cup upon a low wooden table, then sat back on her reed mat. 'Perhaps this is something that Goralschai has done to you, or even the woman you know as the Yaotl.'

Now she moved suddenly, with renewed conviction, arm extended like a superhero about to blast him with a ray of indeterminate properties. Her shadow remained frozen, unmoving at her side as something technological expanded in the air above, dropping from empty space - a metal carapace of liquid chrome that smelled of onions, or at least made Primo think about the smell of onions. He decided this probably wasn't his fault.

'It was her.' He was as sure of this in so much as he could presently be sure of anything. This absence, this yawning gap the size of a mountain range was her work and it sat uneasily amongst the rigorous order that Ordnance-Tetrarch Goralschai had been building. She was extraneous, something attracted to the process in the way that vultures are drawn to a carcass.

'She wishes to destroy the Quincunx, to prevent its completion.'

Gedarra was startled by his certainty. 'How can you know this?'

Having no readily explained idea, he was unable to answer.

The alien woman dipped her head, either inspecting the contents of a tortilla she had just picked from a platter, or considering his hunch. Looking up, she had either failed to reach a conclusion or really had been puzzling over the mixture of cooked fish and peppers.

'Well although I would be interested to know where her loyalties lie,

that is good, I suppose.'

This was the first time he'd heard this sentiment given voice, and Primo realised with some surprise that he couldn't entirely bring himself to concur with such a view. The more the picture was revealed to him, the more he saw the necessity of its coming to fruition.

One of the Mexica could be heard talking to the guard stood immediately outside the room, then the woven curtain was swept back and Icnopilli entered. He surveyed the plates and cups, saw that the two of them were still eating. He bowed low, performing the customary gesture.

'When you are rested we will ready ourselves. I would recommend sleep for a little while.'

Gedarra's complexion approached that of milk. 'What are we—'

'Huixachtepetl.' Primo failed to conceal his irritation. 'This evening we are attending the New Fire Ceremony. That is why we have been brought here, and why we have been shown such hospitality. You really should take some interest in what is going on in front of your eyes.'

'Oh...' She had nothing to add, her silent, brittle distress an increasing annoyance.

'It's not the end of the world, Gedarra. Quite the opposite in fact.'

11.2 (north)

Visiting hill country, Todd had once seen buffalo stampeding in the distance. It wasn't exactly the John Wayne moment it might have been, nothing *sweeping across the plains* as such, but it was as close as he was going to get given how buffalo weren't so common as they had once been. This was somehow similar despite the fog and the mist and the nature of the forces presently sweeping across the plains of Mictlan towards the obsidian mountain, some way distant.

'You think it's Saint Anthony?' He wondered what form the monster would take for its battle royale with the massed hordes of the Mexican underworld. Last they saw it had taken on the appearance of a thousand El Caminos parked outside trailer homes, white guys with mullets and those shitty looking jailhouse tatts drinking Pabst and listening to Kiss on eight track cartridge, this apparently being the body it deemed best suited to battling Xochitonal.

'You think they can stop that thing?'

'I doubt it, although they might slow it down some. You're part of the Quincunx, and it's formed from your experience, so it's learning to use elements of the mythology.' Scarface wagged his tail. 'I suppose I shouldn't complain seeing as how that's why *I'm* here.'

The two of them had been climbing a shallow incline for the past half hour, leaving the Region of Heart Eaters as they made for the ninth and last level of Mictlan. The Heart Eaters were catlike with maybe a touch of timberwolf or grizzly, but neither Todd nor Scarface possessed any heart to be eaten, at least no yolia in Nahua terms, and so had passed through without notice.

Up here they could see across most of the realm, at least as far as the obsidian mountain, viewing those regions they had crossed like they were just different parts of the board game, which in a sense they were. Under ordinary, or at least ordinarily *mythic* circumstances, the Regions of Bitter Winds, Banners, and Arrows might have proven troublesome, whipping the flesh from their bones by one means or another; but the denizens of those realms were all heading for the mountain, vast clouds of arrows or flags or stone knives swarming off to aid the crocodilian guardian of the third level.

'I guess we must be getting near.' Fishing for a response, Todd regarded his dog, his *nagual*.

Scarface presently said nothing, hind leg in the air and busily ministering to his nether regions. Finishing, he shook himself and trotted on, heading further up the slope. Either he hadn't heard or considered this answer enough.

They rose into a cloud bank, freezing dew forming on Todd's face and in his hair. Visibility reduced to ten feet ahead, then something like five, then arm's length. The fog darkened upon either side, gradually resolving into facing vertical walls of black rock, closing in as they went on, contracting to a mere fissure. The dog went a little way ahead, lost in the grey and marked only by the sound of his nails clicking upon the stone.

Walking on for what felt like ten minutes but could have been much longer, they came to the end of the narrow passage. The rocks opened out onto a mist shrouded basin, scree leading down to a sea of low lying fog strewn with crude buildings, blocky shapes and other indistinct structures which barely left an impression upon the eye.

'This, as I'm sure you realise, is Mictlan.' The dog did not sound happy.

Todd shivered and tried to recall when last he'd felt so cold. He noticed a figure in the mist a little way away, quite obviously an observer - a

desiccated corpse with the feet of a cockerel, one eye glaring through a crack running vertically down its stone mask. This was Ixpuztec - *Broken Face*, a minor Death God so his nagual had told him. They first saw this creature back in the Region of Banners, one of a number of lesser Death Gods seen during the course of their journey.

'You think they're following us?'

'I expect so.' Face's concern was not obvious. He trotted forward, heading down into Mictlan oblivious. 'They tend to stupidity and a lack of courage, hence the fearsome appearance I guess.'

This made sense. There was some aspect of these creatures that went beyond the usual stuff of nightmares as distilled within the twentieth century imagination, something repulsive and primal. These things were so basic and ancient that it scared him just to think on it, and others had emerged from the mist in the wake of the first - Tzontemoc the Beheaded, flayed skull in eternal, impossible freefall from his shoulders; and the Ash Scatterer whom Face had identified as Nextepehua, not much more than a bloody rib cage within a shroud.

'How come they weren't enlisted in the war against Saint Anthony?'

'Probably they were, but like I say, they're stupid and hardly Purple Heart material.'

Todd picked a stone from the ground, hefting it for weight then hurling it at the three lurking monstrosities. It sailed past them. They scattered with a hiss, dispersing into the fog.

Trapped in someone else's idea of hell, this was becoming a little too intense even given all he'd already been through. He'd never really considered that there could be anything *beyond* evil, but figured that if there was then it was most likely down here. Evil might be viewed as something involving choice, something from the world of the living. The spirit of this place was more like a raw mindless force, ploughing on like a glacier and with all the personality of a black hole.

They scrambled down the slope, moving like crabs to slow themselves as minor avalanches of pebbles skittered away to herald their arrival. At length they came to level ground and headed off into the streets of Mictlan. The buildings, such as they were, seemed all facade, just impressions imprinted in the fog, not all of them reaching the whole way to the stony ground. Still more unsettling were the Fleshless themselves, half-seen bodies drifting along the avenues of the realm, things which would draw one's eye only to wither under the force of direct observation.

Mictlantecuhtli, the monarch of the Dead Land was before them as an impression of a vast skeleton, bones spotted with blood and yellowing blotches of decay, paper streamers flowing all around. One moment they had been alone, now they were granted an audience, and it seemed like there had been no discrete point at which the Death God had appeared or even announced his presence; and now he was joined by his consort, Mictecacihuatl, a more or less identical skeletal presence denoted as female by some means other than the apparently physical.

This was the meeting.

The Death God held a cage, smooth wooden twigs bound with twine and a tiny yellow bird within, a honeycreeper, white stripes upon a dark head tilted to one side in recognition.

'This is what you have come for.' The jaw moved as Mictlantecuhtli spoke, a redundant affectation which should have appeared comical but was instead only gruesome. 'Your yolia is expressed as this yollotototl, but perhaps you already knew as much.'

Todd looked at the bird, this *yollotototl*, somehow not finding the idea strange.

'You have no right.' It was a mystery how Scarface's yappy cartoon squeak could carry such command presence but there it was. 'You know why we have come.'

This amused the Death Goddess on some level. 'The bird is quite safe here, and in four years he will return him to the realms above so that he may take to the wing. I believe he is very much looking forward to it.'

'Perhaps I have no right, but I have this part of your soul in safekeeping for a very good reason, and I do not intend to release it.' Mictlantecuhtli set down the cage beside his throne.

They were in some manner of subterranean palace, basalt columns and wall hangings in varying shades of nocturnal monochrome. The lesser Death Gods now stood arrayed along either side of the room, just part of the architecture.

'So what reason would that be?' Todd surprised himself with the question, with how much sense this was beginning to make and how easily he had taken to his role.

'Your birthless existence serves the purpose of Fire in the Serpent, and you are his death totem, the one who stands in the north. By your placement his day-sign will be fortified as Xiuhtecuhtli, the Turquoise

Lord, and our time will be made secure.'

Mictecacihuatl leaned forward as though sharing a confidence. 'There will be a great renewal. Even those worlds beyond the near and close will be brought within the province of our story.'

'It will be good for business.' The skull of the male pitched forward, presenting the illusion of a smile. 'The avenues of the dead will be flooded with wandering souls.'

Silence reigned, all sound frozen in the dank air. Todd looked around, wondering what the hell to do now. The great hall felt somehow smaller than it had a moment before, either that or the lesser Death Gods had grown some figurative balls and were drawing near. His gaze lingered momentarily on Micapetlacoli, the bodiless shroud with the skull of a horse.

It didn't make sense. These guys didn't even have horses before the Spanish showed up.

He recalled fragments of what Conti had revealed, reminding himself of a bigger picture, something that had begun to come together. This Quincunx - and he had *no* idea where he'd even heard the term - was all set to transform the world, the *universe* even, bringing this myth he was trapped inside into being. He was himself part of the transformation, a chess piece. He imagined the movie version of himself -*man, what the fuck is up with this crazy-ass shit?* - and felt uncommonly glad that life or whatever *this* was didn't work anything like Hollywood had promised. He had to consider the myth, recall those old stories and how they worked.

'We can bargain, right? There must be *something* you want.' Making the screw-face, he looked the Death God right in the hollow of his eye socket.

'Perhaps.' Mictecacihuatl came forward, stepping down from the throne with more grace than seemed right for what was essentially a mass of bones. Her skull tilted to the side as she addressed her husband. 'Look closely into the span of his life, all those days suspended between the birth postponed and death denied. There are people.'

Mictlantecuhtli now came down from the other throne, moving closer, predatory and fascinated. 'All those lives squashed together in the manner of reeds, and all so close to death.'

Todd glanced at his Chihuahua, reluctant to betray an apparently weak hand by asking for a translation. He felt suddenly conscious of being at some as yet undefined disadvantage.

'You do not know.' Mictlantecuhtli's voice carried something akin to surprise, words like a whisper of wind. 'There is a house inside the count of your days, hidden there by Fire in the Serpent. I would say he thought to set it in a place away from the gaze of other, greater houses.'

Man, what the fuck is up with this crazy-ass shit? presented itself as a reasonable option for the second time but before Todd could react, the female skeleton was already reaching *into* him like a kindly old relative playing a trick, a bony claw pulling nickels from his ear. 'Let us see.'

The tail end of a scream sounded far away and an unusually tall female was amongst them, short black hair and some sort of grey uniform. She held in her hand a silver globe.

'Thraenrellis.' The Death God enunciated the name, if it *was* a name, with lurid curiosity.

11.3 (west)

Time was quickening, divided into thirteen parts. The earlier of these had each endured for an age, or at least for what felt like housedays; but now the childrene were down to moments. Specifically they were down to *final* moments, flickering briefly before their eyes like the beating wings of some tiny creature.

This instant flashed past with such haste as to cast doubt upon whether it had yet truly happened.

Emiousha had lost her arm below the shoulder. Now a ragged stump dripped in its place, although not so much as one might expect despite the severity of the wound - dark deoxygenated crimson soaking into the milder red of her peignoir. The other arm was upheld, raised in incongruous triumph towards the rafters which supported the landing immediately above. A blue-green jewel shone in the palm of her hand, a sacred heart lighting the darkness.

The Queen of the House ran from Tecpatl. She hid there in the desert. She hid within a barrel cactus. Tecpatl cannot find her. The clay man looks around. He says: "You are away from your hearthstones. You are away from your fire. Here you will freeze and die in the night."

Tecpatl went away then and the Queen of the House carries on her journey. She will save the children from Fire in the Serpent. She did this. She did it there in the North. She did it there in the cold, enclosed region. There was something terrible there upon that road. A demon blocked her

path. Youaltepoztli would not let her pass, and this is why we say that he is a fearful omen. He stopped her. He took her arm in that place. He cut off her arm.

Another one, the Kithriarch realised, reeling as her continuity returned to a more familiar experience of spacetime. This aspect would likely get worse before it got better. She saw herself, arm sliced clean between two edges of wood polished keen as blades; then reaching in a second time - actions born of something higher than thought - pulling the monster's stone heart from its chest before the first droplet of blood from the stump of her other shoulder could hit the floor.

The Queen of the House points her index finger downwards. This is the gesture by which we signify an order or something that is said. She had the precious stone now. She gave orders now and told people to do this or to do that. She held up the piece of jade and made Youaltepoztli speak. She made him tell her about the one who had caused all of this to happen.

This is what he said: "He is a very great sorcerer. He works his magic and causes people to fall over. He is an owl. He is a creature that one hears blowing at night. He saw the face of the world and wished to make it appear within him. He wrought evil and terrible charms.

First he went to the East, from which things originate. There he fooled the King Acamapichtli and took the breath and blood from him. He made a personage appear there. He said: 'You are now my Acamapichtli. You are the first and the one who rises. All will come from you. You will cause things to happen.' He made a twin and sent him to live in our Tenochtitlan. He did this.

Next he went to the North, the realm of the dead. Acamapichtli had caused the second to be stillborn. The twin of the King caused him to be drowned. He sat in his place in the count of days. He destroyed him and made him a servant of death and things that are slow and cold. The sorcerer gave him his own days and said: 'You will live in this way,' and 'here is how you will endure.'

The sorcerer then took a house from heaven and set it inside the heart of the dead boy. He put the house and the women inside this boy's story. That is how this youth took sustenance and was able to live in those days. That is how he was fortified.

He goes to the West, the region of the seed ground. In the west he arranged the house of the women that we have already seen. He made them live alone and in the fog and mist. He fooled them and caused them to hurt

themselves. They allowed him to carry on in this way believing him to be an ally, for he had aided them when they gathered the wood and stones of their house. He aided them when it came to mark out the count of their days and deliver their children. He used the loom that was owned by the women and made his twin there. He deceived them.

He took a young boy from the house and sent him to the South, the land of thorns. He gave him new clothes and armour and said: 'Wear this raiment and your fame will be witnessed by others. Go to Tenochtitlan and serve for my image there.' That is what he said.

Time jerked forward, hitting a stone in the head of a dreamer. Emiousha cried out as the shock of mutilation reached her pain centres. She shut them down with a thought, remotely aware of hearing another heavy footfall from somewhere above, the first since time's brief bifurcation. Swaying, oddly servile, the headless body of Youaltepoztli stood waiting on her second wish, or the return of its jadeite heart, whichever came first.

'What was *that*?' Laethynrisa was worse than ever, hair plastered to her reddening face with sweat, eyes bulging from the gloom as Dorhira struggled to hold her up. 'Was that real?'

'Orthogonal spacetime.' The Kithriarch winced at the idea but could think of no better term. 'The sorcerer is using ritual technology to rewrite the spiral politic. We are unfortunately...' she trailed off, absently fascinated by Rothis binding her stump with strips of material torn from her peignoir. There was blood everywhere. The paint upon the childe's face was smudged. She looked as though she was making ready for battle.

'Kithriarch?'

She remembered herself. 'We are unfortunately a significant component of this ritual operation and are therefore at the causal epicentre.'

Rothis sighed, binding away. 'So you are telling us that this is how life will be from hereon, and these interludes are a taste of the universe to come?'

Four further footfalls sounded from above.

The Kithriarch looked up.

She has stopped us from drawing breath. She has given us our flags and our strips of paper.

Gedarra's unidentified female was, after all, representative of some unknown group, an uninvited guest; not that it mattered now.

It had been Ordnance-Tetrarch Goralschai from the beginning, no

telling how far back it went, where it had all started. Whether by accident or design, House Meddhoran was a piece in a game that surely not even the most devious of the House Xianthellipse archons would have knowingly endorsed. He had made an *actual* weapon out of history - Emiousha knew the term but had never really considered what it might entail beyond its sounding ostentatious - a vast knot of cause and effect spanning centuries, a ritual infection at the heart of the spiral politic, a mechanism by which the Ordnance-Tetrarch would achieve apotheosis.

It seemed so grand a design as to border upon the absurd, but it would work. He had woven his totems right here on House Meddhoran's breeding engine, and of course the breeding engine allowed for direct access to the caldera, the cornerstone of creation, providing one had sufficiently high level technology. Hardly surprising that he had been so keen to listen when they first began to express doubts about what House Xianthellipse had in mind for them.

Ordnance-Tetrarch Goralschai was rewriting the spiral politic from the ground up with himself as its most fundamental organising principal; and he was doing this in order to destroy it.

Naturally there would be a point to all this, albeit an insane point. Emiousha had decided it was enough to understand this much without getting into the twisted details.

The fifth leaden footfall slammed down upon a step high above.

She had stopped the chapterhouse from drawing breath, whoever *she* might be. Deprived of breath, and burning up with the fever of spontaneous parturition, House Meddhoran had been eating itself alive; but now all that primal ritual energy was surging through the breeding engine from caldera to Quincunx with such violence that the Netherweald was boiling away.

Laethynrisa yelped, folding with pain and clutching at the distended sphere of her swollen belly. Emiousha realised this meant something, that this was the threshold moment, but she had no idea what was supposed to happen. Her anamnesis had been thorough, but had contained nothing on the subject of this bizarre animal function. They were all very much in the dark.

Painted Woman held up the Child Bearer. She supported her. She set a mat upon the floor and lit fires within the room. She made the place secure. She did this wisely.

'Not now!' Laethynrisa collapsed, pleading for respite. The wood floor

was inexplicably soaking. The childrene all called out, all crying at once.

The Kithriarch looked up the steps and saw the Drudge on the landing above.

Child Bearer began to speak but was startled by the sun. Tecpatl rose in the North as the sun. He threw his arrows there. He threw them at the Mother just as he had thrown them at her sister before. He meant to kill her there. This was his work.

The Queen of the House then rose up. She caught the sun ray as it flew. She caught it as though it were an arrow, just as Chimalma is said to have caught the arrows loosed by Mixcoatl.

Emiousha gagged on a knot of panic considering a second childe reduced to black volcanic glass, and decided in an instant that she would rather die.

The Queen of the House went up into the air and reached out her good arm. She caught the arrow. She stopped the Northern sun. She opened her hand and let fall the heart that was in the demon Youaltepoztli. This is the precious gem that we call chalchihuitl in our Nahuatl language.

She took the ray of sun and threw it back. She aimed well. Her aim was good. The Queen of the House fired an arrow which pierced Tecpatl. That is what she did.

The jade heart fell from her grip. She let it go and that was how it came to fall.

Pain in Emiousha's side as Rothis, again the unexpected saviour, slammed into her, pushing her up against the wall timed to a colossal splintering crash. She looked back and caught a glimpse of something dark, hard and glossy. Tecpatl was dead.

It is said in those days that there was a temple upon the hill of Huixachtepetl. This was in the year 1-Tochtli (1506). The maiden Coatliicue worked upon the hill there. It was her duty to sweep. She keeps the temple clean. That was her work.

One day a piece of jade fell from heaven. Coatliicue swallowed it. She tucked it in her garment. She returned home and told no-one of this. Of this men shall know nothing.

This was the work of the one who had let the chalchihuit fall. This was her work. The Queen of the House caused this to happen and so Coatliicue was large with child.

The Queen of the House was born there on Huixachtepetl to the Virgin.

That was how they say it happened. She was born there in that place. She had wished it to be so. She had followed the story and understood it well. The pictures were clear. She saw what they said without difficulty. She said: "I will tell my own story. I will sing my own song." That is what she said.

She was born there on Huixachtepetl.

This is how the story is told.

11.4 (south)

The city builds a world using its prisoner as source material, she told Momacani before they were separated, and now there was an entire district comprising buildings the like of which he had never seen, dark and glowering beneath a sky of blood. These would most likely be some reconstitution of Yaotl's heritage. What bothered him the most about this was that she too had been taken captive despite being the author of whatever enchantment had built this place. Perhaps with her body new grown from fruits and weeds, it no longer recognised its master.

More troubling still was the house within the fog and mainly because he somehow knew it related to himself, to some part of his own story that he had given no consideration before this moment of understanding that it had been lost. There was a house of cloth, home to the signs of an alien pictography scribbled upon pebbles, and this was apparently his own work. He considered that his mother and father might be found here, and in that moment paused to wonder when was the last time he had seen them, the last time he had referred to them, the last time he had even *thought* of them. One mystery piled on top of another and it had become prudent to strive for some sense of focus. That which could not be resolved, would no longer be considered.

'You went away.' The elder had a face of heavy lines, somehow more flattened than any Mexica. He was of a different people and his robes, although much like those of any noble of Tenochtitlan, were woven of cruder material. He indicated a series of pictograms within the painted book. Momacani recognised himself as denoted by the presence of his day-sign, a small figure in profile, above his head the twelve dots and tuft of grass grown within a human jawbone identifying him as having been born on the day Mactlactome Malinalli, or *Twelve Grass*.

'See here how you have escaped from the house.'

He looked. In the corner of the page his own day-sign was repeated in greater detail and embellished with a trapeze and ray solar quantifier. This account showed the day of his birth.

'You escaped and your story was retold, made anew from start to end; and so you became a living vessel, one who was put upon the earth so that Xiuhtecuhtli might be reborn.'

They were in a dark chamber lit only with oil, flame flickering across the paintings in the walls. These too were crude, a poor echo of the refined images within the codex and more like the work of children. He did not understand why he, a Mexica of Tenochtitlan, and so ingrained as to have been recognised as the living Ixiptla of Huitzilopochtli, should find himself in an imagined Tollan amongst the ghosts of Toltecs. Perhaps the city was broken, no longer able to coddle its prisoners with the courtesies described by Yaotl; or perhaps *his own*thoughts had recreated the capitol of a culture which had perished many years before, thoughts to which he himself was not party; after all, it would not be the first time.

There was a sound of burning, the crackle of a conflagration and Toltecs crying out in the streets. Momacani looked to the window but saw nothing to match what he had heard, or thought he had heard. He was in a larger place, a brighter room decorated with greater care, and the transition shocked him for a moment. The scribe had gone along with his book and it felt like rejection. The Atepexolotl had cast him out of that moment, stung by some passing realisation. This Tollan really *was* his own doing, the prison he had chosen for a quite specific reason over some scenario that would have made more immediate sense.

'Drink, my Lord.' He passed the cup to Huemac.

The ruler took the octli in feeble hands, shrivelled and unsteady with age. He smiled, the same face as the scribe had worn, missing teeth. At his side were three empty cups, red ceramics from Cholula each with its own little procession of Gods and Goddesses painted around the rim. He spoke and his breath was a cloud of fermented maguey, foul and intoxicating. 'Do not think yourself too important or grand, my child. You are a son of the house, and the house was granted sustenance by the dead boy. I shall regain him before long. He will again languish in my gaol.'

Momacani had a fifth cup held in one hand behind his back, clay thin as paper, cool to the touch and very strong. He brought it to his nose for examination so as to see whether the Tlatoani had already drunk from it, then realised his mistake, perhaps revealing too soon this reiteration of the

myth.

Huemac met his gaze without anything to indicate that he had recognised the moment for what it was. He drained the cup and belched with no obvious indication of having understood what he had done. This, Momacani thought, was just as it had happened in Tollan. Huitzilopochtli was after all just one facet of the sorcerous Tezcatlipoca, and he was now doing to the beast of the city as the Night Wind had done to the Toltecs.

There was a mirror upon the floor at his side, a polished circle of obsidian. He seized it and held it up, showing the ruler his own face.

'I am old.' The greying eyes became broad with sorrow, even a sly trace of disgust. 'Neither do I understand why this should trouble me, and yet trouble me it does.'

'The people will hate you. You must not refuse my aid.' Momacani dipped two fingers into the bowls of pigment and began to paint the face of his ruler, alternating stripes of red and white running down from crinkled brow to tortoise neck. Once this was done and the paint had dried, he fixed gold jewels to the regent's ears and through his nose and lips.

'Where is that girl?' Huemac laughed, falling over and grimacing as his elbow hit the stone tiles of the floor. 'Bring her to me.'

The stone flew from the slingshot, arcing through the air to hit the Towering Man in the centre of his immense forehead. There was a sound like a duck egg breaking and blood streamed down his nose onto his chest.

Momacani leapt back to avoid being crushed as the great body toppled forward like a felled tree. This was another part of the mythology. Huemac, drunk and helplessly in love with himself, had called for Quetzalpetlatl, his own sister, so it was probably just as well that he had not been obligated to bear witness to that particular episode.

The city was now in flames, which suggested that whatever he had done might be counted towards a victory in the near future. Huemac might represent the head of the city, if such was allowed by the rules of this engagement, so it seemed conceivable that these scenes dealt with the body, still moving on, determined to complete its task regardless as some headless fowl.

The people were like animals, all clambering across the corpse of the giant, gagging from the stench and dying on their backs like beetles.

Covering his face, Momacani turned away, trying to block out the screams of the dying, the roar of flames and the fall of a civilisation as

apparently envisioned by his own thoughts. He knew the story well, and was struggling to recall what would happen next. The people had been outraged by the appearance of their Tlatoani and had been inspired to bloody revolution by his increasing decadence. Then there had been the snow in summer, the Towering Man - although there was almost certainly more to come for *that* particular scenario - the woman selling chillis in the market, the monster who married Huemac's daughter, the war with the Rain God and so on; the story was alive, changing and evolving with each telling, never set in stone or allowed to become merely history. This made the narrative difficult to anticipate, but equally it meant that it could be subject to his hostile action. It could be defeated just as Ocotochtli had promised.

Unaccountably, Momacani felt unusually alive, as though - he winced at the cliché - he had been born to experience this moment, although that was almost certainly the mythology talking.

The wooden figure danced in the palm of his hand, its limbs animated by forces that would surely kill anyone failing to gird themselves with the appropriate offerings. This was what the foreigners had failed to understand - it had never been about engaging with the sacred forces; it had been about *keeping them at bay*, at arm's length.

The Toltecs crowded in, fascinated by the little cedar wood doll, the first signs of madness choreographed in a twitch at the corner of a mouth, a giggle or a hunched shoulder. This was confusing. Momacani could no longer tell when these events were occurring, which order was observed, Tollan falling or whether he was running backwards around the calendar, a murder in reverse, against nature.

In that instant he realised the essence at the absolute heart of the situation - the whole thing encompassing the house, the dead boy, the monster who had hoped to steal the New Fire Ceremony for his own purpose. Somewhere within the tangle was a current against nature, and the world was losing its mind. His hip stung as he interposed himself between the hoop and the solid rubber ball. It bounced away with a thud felt through the soles of his sandals. Looking around, he realised that the sloping spectator terraces either side were populated by creatures that were not human, and nor were they sprung from his imagination; perhaps this part of the battle was drawn from Yaotl's experience.

His opponent stepped forward, taking up the ball to resume play. He was dressed in the traditional protective padding worn about the waist like a thick belt, sandals and nothing more; and it wasn't especially surprising to

see how his face was formed from serpents.

The God dropped the ball in the designated starter circle, then dived to deflect it with his elbow. It sailed into the sky, into clouds illuminated by the fires now raging below. It hit the wall and sailed towards the vertical stone hoop.

Momacani ran, leaping into the air, grunting in pain as the heavy rubber slammed into his thigh. He landed without any overt display of athletic grace, raising dust from the playing surface, and ran over to intercept the Rain God's renewed attack.

Tlaloc stumbled, momentarily disadvantaged as one of the smaller, more colourful snakes slid across his eyeline. Momacani ran around him, catching the ball with his knee as it bounced a second time. It soared in a straight line to the far side of the court and neatly through the hoop of his opponent.

He opened his eyes.

Above lay a silent canopy of stars, a hazy cluster at the dead centre of the heavens - Miec, the *Many*, although Yaotl had referred to them by some other name. The important point was that these were the stars which would birth the New Fire.

He sat up, realising he was cold and alone on the side of a hill. A little way away was a peculiar tangle of jewellery or perhaps weapons of some sort. He got to his feet and went over, studying the broken thing. It had been a mechanism of some fashion, but forged from something like silver or perhaps copper, all that was left of the monster that had perished as a city in flames.

His fame had at long last been fortified.

An owl hooted from within a nearby acacia.

He turned towards the summit and was not too surprised to recognise it as Huixachtepetl. There was a faint glow arisen from beyond the ridge. The torches had been lit and they were waiting for him. For the first time in many days Momacani felt at peace.

11.5

This is the lowest level of House Meddhoran, the cradle of the breeding engine, and this is a delicate operation. The system draws power from the caldera - the omphalos of the Homeworld and, by extension, history

itself. The work is contingent to a supremely light touch. A single error and an entire future may boil away to so much lost archemathic potential. He's scoring the opening aria of an event somewhat more dramatic than a few miserable empires realising they never existed, but it is a very precise kind of drama, and so he is careful to avoid anything which could attract attention. He covers his tracks with care.

Fear of discovery has dictated some elements of the Quincunx, to which end he buries the components in different eras. Two will be developed a decade or so beyond the ghostpoint by which time humanity has become culturally sterile and of little interest to the Great Houses. Once the process has gathered momentum, it should more or less look after itself, rewriting any physical law that might impede its progress as required; and by the time the Quincunx activates, the caldera itself will be infected beyond all retrovising, and the structure of history will change to accommodate an entirely different set of causal laws. Nothing will ever be the same again - as the cliché would have it - at which point, nothing will ever be *again.*

He uploads Acamapichtli's biodata, everything the Tlatoani ever did. The information maps itself onto the template and the looming begins. The child is reborn some seven-hundred years after his time, the same biodata with all its attendant cultural resonance hothoused into an alternate stretch of continuity; then the inevitable domino effect as the cuckoo distorts its surrogate worldline, casting its half-brother into superposition. House Meddhoran is given the indeterminate biodata for its tropism. The cuckoo generates the life it has usurped; the usurped gives focus to the House; and - thanks to another minor protocol Goralschai has installed - the first to escape the confines of the chapterhouse will become the vessel of his apotheosis.

*In the gloom of the chamber, Goralschai watches trails of cause and effect align themselves to his design. Then he notices a flaw, nothing major but a flaw nonetheless. The act of bifurcation has left a mark upon Acamapichtli's biodata, a scar upon the*ihiyotl *of his subject - as he understands the concept to have been tagged. The flaw is now duplicated upon the physical biomass of the copy.*

He considers this for a moment, wondering at the ramifications, causal irregularities which could draw the attention of the Great Houses or worse. Nevertheless, the pattern appears to be holding, and he now recognises the flaw as the wound by which the Mexica ruler conceded to his ministrations

in the first place.

The Quincunx has begun to take effect, already collapsing probabilities according to his design, gathering up its own loose ends and working them into the fabric. He could probably destroy the breeding engine, and the process would still find some route by which the destruction would contribute to its ultimate completion.

As his work embeds itself within the appropriate regions of causality, the breeding engine resumes normal functions, mapping and monitoring the worldlines of its childrene. Goralschai looks towards the levels above as House Meddhoran is drawn into the Quincunx, and finds himself flooded with relief.

It has started.

It might be interesting to see what will happen with these childrene once their chapterhouse becomes subject to physical laws other than those of the Homeworld, although perhaps not that *interesting.*

12.1 (east)

The land was alive, spitting and trembling as something ancient awoke with a cry the size of the world, raging so deep that the soles of Acamapichtli's feet felt it with greater acuity than his ears which had thus far noted only a terrible silence. Rivers of fire ran for as far as the eye could see, making a patchwork of the land. The lake too was boiling, gouts of steam rising to blot out those once familiar mountains on the eastern rim of the Valley. All of his life he had expected the end and had become accustomed to the truism of extinction, but never had he thought it would come from below. The stars remained in their canopy of sky, the only constant in a restless landscape. It was written that in the last days they would descend like spiders on silken threads to devour the souls of the living. He wondered what was keeping them, when they would make their move.

Nauhyotl, his loyal adviser and grandfather these last few years was, as ever, at Acamapichtli's side, similarly unruffled aside from sharing the surprise of an apocalypse born from below. 'You have known this for some time I would say, Lord.'

The world had been out of balance since before the coronation when, hidden away from the Tecpanecs in Coatlinchan, Acamapichtli had been visited upon by the sorcerer. The foreigner had healed an affliction to that part of his soul found at the base of the spine, above the fundament; and in doing so this Fire in the Serpent took his blood, a deed which itself turned out to be the cause of the affliction: a serpent devouring its own tail. Clearly the man had been an owl, and this too, this final day was a consequence of his perfidy.

The advisor, now using a wooden stick for walking, eased himself down upon the low wall bordering the shrine. The temple steps had given him trouble, but as the world was running down, he had been adamant that he might at least get a decent view. Settled, his rhetorical mutterings resumed. 'You would think we'd have some spirit whom we might address at this juncture. Given how even my behind probably has its own tutelary Deity, you would have thought one of our boys might at some point have looked at those burning mountains and come up with a few Gods.'

'They were stolen from us. That is why this is happening.'

'How do you mean?'

Acamapichtli found himself unable to fit language to the idea, and so only shook his head in lament of an aborted future. The sorcerer had taken his blood and made a twin, a boy imbued with the ixihtec of one who lays a foundation, who causes things to live, a double of himself to be used in some secretive ritual without incurring the wrath of darker, unknowable Gods who would notice that the great city of Tenochtitlan had lost its founder; and now the monstrous Yaotl, the female aspect of the Smoking Mirror, had made her own use of the twin, striking at him here and now, pulling those Mountain Gods imagined by Nauhyotl out at the root.

More vexing still, Acamapichtli had no idea how he could know any of this. Primo Acamapichtli Isleño de la Vega guessed it would be something to do with his being wired into the Quincunx, although the memory of his namesake, the first ruler of Tenochtitlan nevertheless caught him by surprise, particularly as he had no idea when this vision - or whatever it was - had come to him. Certain Biblical creationists believed in something called synchronic time, great ages existing at right angles to reality to account for million year old fossils in a world that had been made in seven days. Perhaps it was something of that sort.

The summit of Huixachtepetl - Cerro de la Estrella as it would be known in Mexico City - was identical to its duplicate down there in Tlalocan, barring the scaffold structure built by Goralschai which had in any case obviously been a metaphor. The area was paved with flagstones about a central stone altar with four braziers in the shape of Fire Gods, but still it seemed far from complete, unimpressive even by the dilapidated standards of the twenty-first century ruin. Yet there hadn't been any ceremony in 1506 according to the records. Motecuhzoma had delayed it by one year, but here it was, the event that hadn't happened all ready to go.

Aside from the location - midnight fires blazing on the top of a hill that could be seen clear across the other side of the Valley - this was to be a private rather than public event: thirty or forty Mexica officials, knights, attendants, representatives of the ruling families, the priests with their wild locks and black body paint. Icnopilli stood nearby with some other Ixtilque, custodian to the prisoners. Primo had never heard of the Ixtilque - the theological equivalent of a secret service - but a few older, less reliable records listed arrow knights alongside the better known eagle and jaguar orders, so it seemed reasonable to assume they might be one and the same.

The prisoners were Gedarra and himself, defined as such not so much by restricted liberty as their having been held down and dosed with ololiuhqui

a little while ago. Ololiuhqui was morning glory. Primo couldn't actually recall its effects in detail beyond it being an hallucinogen, but in any case, it hadn't affected him in the slightest. That would be his ixihtec at work no doubt. Gedarra's excuse was probably extraterrestrial biology.

She was stood between two knights, a weird little alien ghost caught between frowning birds of prey, transfixed by all the fire and the people. She seemed like a nice enough girl, but it was clear that she didn't understand, and probably wouldn't understand; and it was like talking to a child in many respects. Her last great contribution was the idea that they had been brought here because Goralschai had possessed Motecuhzoma and they were to be sacrifices. Whilst the latter was probable, and the ruler would certainly be remembered as morbidly superstitious and prone to visions, it was equally pertinent that oddities, albinos, twins, and other sports of nature were viewed as symptomatic of the sacred and therefore prime material for the knife.

'Oh God.' Gedarra looked past him, towards the path by which they had arrived.

Primo wondered what she had actually said in the language that he heard as Nahuatl, then followed her gaze to see two more Ixtilque, cotton robes and wooden staffs, escorting an older woman with pale skin and dark hair. She resembled one of the more aggravatingly well-meaning anglo tourists in her ill-fitting embroidered huipil, which in a sense she was.

'Fancy meeting you here.' Yaotl smiled as she was brought across. The smile, as before, was at least as sincere as that of a politician about to kiss a number of babies. Presumably she too had been dosed with ololiuhqui to similarly little effect.

The three of them were bustled together, the two Ixtilque joining the existing retinue of guards as a figure emerged from somewhere to the south, the measured stride of absolute authority, golden bells jingling with each step. Primo had just enough time for a brief impression, taking in the black and blue bands striping his face, the halo of quetzal feathers swaying some three or four feet above and to either side of his head, four bowed retainers carrying the edges of his cloak.

'We may not gaze upon the living form of Lord Motecuhzoma.' The voice was pragmatic rather than officious, and was accompanied by the hand of an Ixtilli obliging Primo's head to a bow. He stared at the thin scattering of dirt and sand upon the flagstones, anticipating the voice of the man who was the present incarnate form of Huitzilopochtli. He could hear

only the hushed voices of Gedarra and Yaotl jostling for clarity against the mountain wind. The latter explained something about Faction Paradox. Apparently she had severed all association with them, and Gedarra apparently believed this to be a good thing.

There would be no convincing her now, had it even been an option. Primo was on his own.

Footsteps, deer hide sandals slapping stone and a collective expression of awe indicated that Motecuhzoma had done something, but two more knights had shuffled in front of Primo, further occluding his already restricted view.

'Goralschai is mad. He wants absolute power over the spiral politic purely for the purpose of destroying it, and this is the function of the Quincunx.' This was Yaotl hissing into Gedarra's ear oddly resembling some terminally chatty guest at a wedding ceremony. Regardless of the information dispensed, it was irritating. 'He's contrived this symbolic web of cause and effect so as to rewrite himself as a God. He'll inhabit Momacani at the point of sacrifice - Momacani being the southern bit of this great big Rubik's cube - and get himself reborn as Xiuhtecuhtli, the Mexican God of Fire and the Passage of Time.'

Gedarra hissed something back with the ferocity of a question. She was buying it.

'Momacani is a living vessel.'

The monologue continued and Primo weighed up the odds of whether delivering a sibilant shhh would be worth the trouble. All that really concerned him was that the ritual should be consummated as intended. He considered Yaotl from the corner of an eye and wondered what to do, whether to do anything at all.

'He's the perfect victim, as I believe is the term. Goralschai cooked him up from the biodata of one of your lot. That precious flaw you all thought such a find was booby trapped to reloom the poor bastard in more easily accessible form.'

Then it hit him with a force that stole his breath.

Coatlinchan, his grandmother's idol, the reason he found himself staring at mountains without any idea what they might mean: somehow she really had stolen the Gods, even the root ideas which kept the volcanos - that was the word, although Lord knows why it should have returned to him now - which kept the volcanos in check; and Fire in the Serpent was creating a

universe in which the explosive currents beneath the planet needed Gods to keep them at heel; and then there was the ritual aspect.

Primo imagined Mexico under a lava field the size of the Americas, the culmination of the disaster Acamapichtli had witnessed, all that heavy matter skewing the delicate balance of the ritual like a ton of concrete in the cake mix.

He stared at the woman and wondered if he would be able to kill her before the knights could stop him, even whether he could kill her. Gedarra's face registered horror, and Primo swung his eyes back in the other direction and, between the backs of two Ixtilque, saw a young Mexica bought forth by jaguar knights - Momacani, the perfect victim as denoted by body paint, the blue and red bands of the Fire God he would become at the point of death. There was something odd about him, even by the standards of the moment, oddly Caucasian features beneath the paint and an even step which suggested that he too was yet to feel the effects of the ololiuhqui with which he would certainly have been dosed.

Gedarra squeaked a name. It sounded preposterously like Rodney.

The air seemed to thicken in prelude to the approaching sacrifice, but it was more than that, like something circling overhead, a presence presaging a storm that would devour all creation. With some oblique higher sense, Primo experienced the consciousness of the architect of the Quincunx, Xiuhtecuhtli-Goralschai waiting for the heart to be torn beating from its crucible, waiting for New Fire to be kindled in the chest cavity of the dying man, waiting to be born.

12.2 (north)

They were no longer inside the palace of the Death God, and Todd could not recall whether they had fled, or whether the throne room itself had vanished from around them. More significant was how, against all odds, the situation was somehow made even worse with the arrival of this Thraenrellis woman. The Gods crowded in, a thicket of rotting bones rattling all around, the stench of excrement and decay rising from beneath flapping shrouds.

But for the Star Fleet scrubs, Thraenrellis had the look of some track star, an Anglo - of course - something to do with Lorraine Conti, he figured. She cradled that metal ball like it was a bomb and she was about to make with some grand and heroic gesture, but the host of underworld spirits closed in regardless. The first move came from Acolmiztli, the

animate remains of an ancient Mexican ruler according to Face, dry old beef jerky fingers scrabbling at Todd's shoulder, the clack of a lifeless jaw chattering its threats.

Noise jammed up the air, a deep electric drone in the gut ascending to an ultrasonic bat chorus. Something that felt like thunder passed through the mist, like the window of an abandoned house thrown open on a spring day. They were alone.

Thraenrellis cursed, glaring at the sphere which was now carved of yellow wood, one of those conversation pieces for the homes of the upwardly mobile. 'It was too much!'

'Yeah, okay.' Todd didn't know and didn't really feel like he had time to care. He snatched the cage up from where it lay on the stony ground, presuming the woman was either a friend, or at least better company than the recently vanished Death Gods. 'You killed them?'

'Just rationalised.' She stared at the little Chihuahua as though she had never before seen its like, which maybe she hadn't. 'Where am I, if you don't mind my asking?'

'This is Mictlan.' Todd shrugged. It was as good an answer as he felt able to give. He watched as Face scampered away, heading for the edge of the dead town to where the ground began to slope upwards. 'I'm Todd Calavero, if that's any good to you. He's Scarface, my spirit guide and yeah, I know just how that sounds.'

'You are Celestis!'

'No, I'm Todd Calavero, like I said.'

They set off following the Chihuahua, relieved of burdensome conversation by the climb back up to the narrow passage through which Todd and his dog had only recently arrived. Making their way between walls of dark rock, communication resumed. Todd made an effort to explain what had thus far befallen him but truthfully didn't understand all of it himself, aside from the primary colour narrative of this journey into the underworld to find the missing third of his soul. Thraenrellis gave some account of herself but may as well have been speaking Polish.

She was not of the Earth. That much was clear.

Todd recalled a conversation he'd had with Gordy, back in the days when shit made sense, how the only way there would ever be black folks on space stations or other planets was when those astronauts figured out there was some shit they couldn't even get a robot to do. This was why he

never liked science-fiction. The future was always too white, some token dude - the one black friend those college types kept around so as to make up the numbers, but never regular people, and definitely no Mexicans. Then again, a show about a guy hosing caustic soda off some shitty old used Martian furniture probably wasn't ever going to be a ratings hit.

Thraenrellis told him that the Death Gods represented discontinuity and that the amaranth - as she called the silver sphere - ironed out the wrinkles from which they were formed, but the problem had been so bad as to overload the mechanism. She'd just cleaned an oil spill with an electric toothbrush and dish washing liquid, and this was why it turned into a lump of wood and was now useless. So much for Team Science-Fiction.

Emerging from the narrow passage through the rock, they arrived at the high plain overlooking the outer realms of Mictlan. Thraenrellis didn't seem to consider this significant, and she hadn't yet got past whatever hard on she had for these Celestis of hers.

'They are regarded as traitors. It comes as no surprise to me that they should be behind this.'

'This Mictlan to which you refer, I do not believe it is this place.' Surprisingly it was quite possible for a Chihuahua to appear irritable. 'There is nothing celestial here. In fact we are at the precise opposite end of the material scale to anything you might consider celestial.'

'It looks different.' Todd gazed out across the regions below, watching the indistinct forms of Heart Eaters prowling through the mist. Beyond these and at greater distance, the air was stripped with swarms of arrows in constant independent flight. Further still, hosts of paper banners cruised through the sea of grey, and then there were the terrible winds formed from stone knives scouring the lowlands of the obsidian mountain.

'What has changed?'

'I would guess they killed Saint Anthony, or at least drove it away.' Face wagged his tail in a somehow thoughtful manner. 'We need to get back to the river, if we can. We should be able to find a cave or some other way out onto the surface.'

'The surface of what?'

'The real world.'

'Right.' Todd rolled the idea around in his head a few times. 'You think we can do that?'

'Well, I hope so. Keep in mind that these hero journeys tend to conclude

with favourable results by some definition, and that we're presently subject to a certain mythic strain of narrative. Fate, for want of a better word, is most likely on our side right now.'

'I see what you're saying.' He glanced over at Thraenrellis, deciding now that she was most likely just some part of the story to which he had no access, someone from the house described by both Primo and Lorraine Conti. Providing he himself didn't turn out to be just some walk-on part, they were going to get through this, and they were going to be okay.

'Well, now that you have your,' - Thraenrellis stared at the bird cage he'd set down by his feet, and it seemed like she was searching for a term that would give no offence - 'your soul...'

She stalled, apparently unable to deliver whatever point she'd been about to make.

Todd hunkered down, peering into the cage. The tiny bird chirped at him, hopping along its perch and ruffling its feathers. Their progress had been a little easier without this part of his mythological self, which logically meant that the return trip was going to be a pain in the ass, and he figured it would be a pain in the ass whether his yolia was caged or not.

He thumbed the catch, allowing the door to fall open. The bananaquit trilled, spread its wings and flew out, diving straight into his chest and vanishing. Todd fell backwards, laughing for no reason he could have hoped to describe. There was a ticklish sensation in the top of his head.

'Well ain't that something.' Recovering himself, he stood, examining the material of his shirt, still unbroken where the bird had entered his body. 'I guess that's how these things work.'

The three of them began heading down the slope towards the beasts. Yellow eyes turned their way, staring through the mist, guttural calls born from animal throats. Soon they were amongst the creatures, treading carefully and trusting in the mythology of the situation to see them through to any conclusion which didn't entail their being eaten alive. It seemed to be working by the grace of whatever had kept Daniel alive, light footsteps taken one at a time as they crossed the sea of Heart Eaters. The beasts might be sated or otherwise preoccupied, but in any case, for the moment they were keeping themselves to themselves.

Todd picked Face up to carry him as the mist thickened and hoped their collective sense of direction was holding up. One of the creatures slithered past but the fog had drawn in so close as to reduce it to instalments, the elongated crocodilian jaw, then its pale gaze briefly flicking across them

from a string of eyes set like yellow jewels in the folds of its skull; then the hide gliding along like the hull of a huge ship. Its movement did nothing to suggest any loss of appetite.

The thing they were calling Saint Anthony had put up a serious fight against Xochitonal, the huge green lizard guarding the outer realms of Mictlan, and it was difficult to see how something with that kind of power could take a beating even from creatures such as these. Perhaps they had won out by sheer weight of numbers, or maybe they had driven it up through the caves to the surface; but that battle must surely have taken its toll.

Todd thought of Saint Anthony at large in the world above, something formed from the logic of a meth freakout just roaming the region of mowing lawns and medical insurance. It didn't sit, not even from the perspective of someone whose entire past had vanished during the moment he was looking the other way.

He considered his dog.

Face licked his hand, apparently aware of these thoughts.

His pet dog was dead, and as such was already at home here in the underworld. It didn't seem like he would survive on the surface, back in the world of daylight and shit being real, but then the same might be true of Todd himself; unless the Quincunx had changed it all by the time they got out of here. The universe might have switched to the power of prayer and blood sacrifice. Not for the first time, Todd experienced a twinge of nostalgia for his job at JMB Restoration, for a five day week of low paid, back breaking bullshit and only a possible divorce to fret upon.

A figure loomed up from the mist, a shroud hung limply from the skull of a dead horse, human arms groping out from the folds of material - Micapetlacoli, and with other lesser death Gods now emerging all around.

Todd looked at Thraenrellis.

Her eyes were wide and liquid. She had no answer. Her weapon had no permanent effect, or perhaps it was just the absurdity of the idea that a Death God might be killed.

'If you have any ideas, I'd be real glad to have you share them.'

The Chihuahua struggled in his arms, jumping down to the ground. 'This doesn't seem good.'

'Well, thanks anyhow.' Todd moved left, searching around. They were encircled, and he had the instinct that he was the focus here. The mist was

clearing, just enough for him to see how these things really weren't so interested in his dog. The Ash Scatterer came forward right past the Chihuahua, just a bloody rib cage swimming through the air, a single eyeball glaring from the upper part of a skull and nothing below the nasal crest.

Thraenrellis had collapsed, hunched up in a heap on the stony ground, hands across her face, whimpering sounds hinting at shock some way past simple terror. Whatever alien soil had produced her kind, this was something beyond her common experience. Maybe death itself was beyond her common experience; and it seemed it might remain so as one of the more corporeal Death Gods stepped across the woman without so much as a glance.

Of the group, Tzontemoc - the headless one - reached Todd first. A clawed fist smashed through his chest ripping out the beating heart.

The boy who had never been truly born was dead.

12.3 (west)

Emiousha laid her palm flat against her stomach which, whilst it did not appear enlarged, seemed oddly taut, and she could feel movement within, the kick of a small foot. Neither Gedarra nor Thraenrellis were showing, and she wondered if they too were aware of the movements of their own neonates. This of course assumed that Gedarra had also succumbed to automictic parturition despite taking her leave of the chapterhouse.

Astonished, Emiousha stared at the two other childrene. The Omniscian, attired in strange and unfamiliar clothing, fought with a small, male human. He had dark hair and bronze skin and a wiry physique. This person she surmised was Primo, first named by Pyrhentana, the creature built by Goralschai from the biodata of the ancestral founder of this culture.

This was almost too much to take in. She had been trapped inside the final, dying moment of House Meddhoran. No—

She had been trapped inside a bubble of orthogonal spacetime, an improbable variant form of existence, myths and legends forcibly stamped onto the quintessence underlying the spiral politic. She had escaped and this place was called Huixachtepetl. Sheer force of semiotic gravity had drawn her here into the heart of the machine that Ordnance-Tetrarch Goralschai built.

It was night, a circle of flickering flames banishing the stars to an inky

black periphery on the summit of what seemed like it must be a hill. There were some low, primitive buildings of crude stone blocks but they looked unfinished, and she could see nothing beyond them. For an instant it occurred to her that there might not actually be anything beyond these structures.

The space was square, crowded with bronze coloured humans, all dancing and chanting to the clattering heartbeat of a giant. They wore animal hide, feathers, more refined garments in a few cases, and a great deal of brightly polished metal. Most had bands of pigment painted across their faces or around their limbs. All were focussed upon the great catafalque at the centre of the proceedings, and it seemed that none had yet noticed Emiousha.

The Kithriarch realised she was prone, laying on her side, sand and dirt in her hair. Looking around, she saw those nearest lost in their own private moments of ceremony, moved by booming wooden drums. She scrambled back, hoping to find a place where she would not be noticed. Thraenrellis was here too, somewhere, although Emiousha had no idea how she could know this.

Also there was another discontinuous human, or at least something female that had incorporated human elements within itself.

She has stopped us from drawing breath. She has given us our flags and our strips of paper.

This was certainly too much to take in. Emiousha could feel the chapterhouse dying, chambers, entire tiers turning autophagic, Laethynrisa screaming as something alive and bloody burst from between her legs; and here, the essence of some uncomfortably familiar presence waiting just beyond the physical, someone known or at least once known curled around within the orthogonal dimensions.

Of all the places where Emiousha could have given birth to live young in defiance of her entire cultural heritage, this would not have been her first choice.

Upon the catafalque lay a figure bearing a striking resemblance to Rhodenet, a little darker, some differences in the bone structure of cheeks presently crossed with bands of turquoise pigment, but clearly Rhodenet, or at least what remained of Rhodenet. At each corner a human in flamboyantly bestial dress pulled upon either an arm or leg, with a fifth behind the victim holding back the head by means of a cloth garrotte. The most elaborately dressed figure of all now came forward, corona of feathers

swaying high above his head, a cape of similar materials laced with gold trailing behind, his eyes glaring from within a painted mask of spotted stars.

Creation held its breath in the presence of this living God.

There was something in his hand, something darkly faceted glistening in the torch light. He raised the stone knife to the sky, gripping it with both hands ready to drive it into the victim with maximum force.

'It's up to you.' The ceremony faltered, unbalanced by these intrusive words as all attention settled upon the woman, an alien presence at centre stage holding a private conversation with the heavens. 'You must by now realise what I can do should I so chose. I know you've put a great deal of work into this project, and it would be a shame to see it go to waste.'

A dark shape flashed across the sand and the dirt, a woman's shadow slipping up the steps towards another group of bellicose humans in florid battle dress, all rushing to deal with this insult. They fell in a moment, dropping to the ground howling in agony.

'I don't think so.'

This was the cousin, Emiousha realised, the Faction Paradox agent; except the taint ran old and deep within her biodata, a former association that had long since scabbed over.

The drums had stilled to silence leaving only the grunting exhortations of Gedarra struggling with her human, the one named as Primo. The Omniscian had his arm halfway up his back but still could not wrestle him to the ground. He screamed, fury not pain, the war cry of a fanatic, the deadening certainty of the zealot. 'The Quincunx must complete!'

Fused with the ritual, Emiousha felt the shockwave, the betrayal and Gedarra's horror.

'If you still intend to go through with this, please, be my guest.' The woman continued to address the stars, ignoring her solitary critic. 'Although the mythology you're so eagerly bringing to term no longer contains anything to keep all of these lovely volcanoes in check,' - she smiled, knowing her victory to be absolute. 'Your little party will make the Permian extinction seem like a minor tremor in Shrewsbury on a wet Tuesday afternoon. That's an awful lot of heavy, volcanic matter to skew the fine balance of your recipe. Gordon Ramsay would not be impressed.'

The Kithriarch regarded the woman, astonished, now realising this entire nightmare was over. This stranger, this simple baseline human had

set herself against the designs of the Ordnance-Tetrarch and won.

Emiousha struggled to her feet and stumbled forward, impelled as though by history itself. Painted humans with stone weapons turned, seeing her for the first time as she stepped into the pool of torchlight. A wave of unease passed through the crowd as this newest intruder came out of the darkness, silhouetted by the soft flames, only one arm.

'Shit!' The woman who had just saved the cosmos choked on her curse. 'Not now!'

There was a second cry, recognition as the Kithriarch met Gedarra's equally horrified gaze and the human, the traitor, broke free.

Acamapichtli went across the square to that place where the demon Yaotl was about her work. He saw that she did her work with evil intent. Her ways were selfish. She was an owl.

He made the ground bloom within her. He caused vines to grow from her stomach. He made peppers and chillis grow around her feet. He came from the East and worked his talent, performing the tasks that Fire in the Serpent had put into him. He performed his tasks well and with diligence. They say that he made corn from the demon. He made her step backwards.

Emiousha reeled, sensing she was about to vomit, sickness swimming in her gut, the child kicking and the sound of somebody screaming. She caught a glimpse of the human male holding onto the woman as her body regressed to plant matter, to chaff and straw fit only for the burning; then the nausea washed over her, mythology twisting her to its inscrutable purpose. With her one arm, she hurled the jade heart of Youaltepoztli up into the night sky.

It is said in those days that there was a temple upon the hill of Huixachtepetl. This was in the year 1-Tochtli (1506). The maiden Yaotl worked upon the hill there. She did her work with evil intent. Her ways were selfish. She was an owl.

One day a piece of jade fell from heaven. Yaotl swallowed it. She tucked it in her garment. She returned home and told no-one of this.

This was the work of the one who had let the chalchihuit fall. This was her work. The Queen of the House caused this to happen and so Yaotl became large with child.

Tecpatl was born there on Huixachtepetl to the woman of discord. That was how they say it happened. He was born there in that place for a second time. He came back.

The Kithriarch collapsed, choking, overwhelmed by the sensoria of all things happening at once: the demise of the surrogate and the wavefront of all she had been - the Immaculata, Olympia, Yaotl, so many others before; the dead human reborn from her vegetable flesh; the presence cycling overhead, a dark spot hidden inside the calendar waiting for the moment it had itself brought into being. She could feel the rage under the ground, great tidal forces below the crust of the world making ready to bloom in the absence of Gods that had once kept the peace.

The boy was moving, cursing, fighting his way out from a grave of rotting vegetable matter that had believed itself human. Green pulp was swept from the dark gloss of his skin and he sat up, looking around, eyes blinking in the firelight. 'Damn...'

Thraenrellis called out, referring to him as Todd. Emiousha looked but could not see the Ecclesiast, and this Todd was in any case occupied in some orthogonal variant of existence. The earth raged, white hot magma battering at the thin shell of the world, now calmed and cooling in the presence of the dead boy. The pattern was falling back into place. The balance had resumed.

Cold, inertia, and the cessation of motion...

The earth cooled.

Emiousha found all her divergent senses suddenly cohered, back in a single place and time. The ceremonial square of Huixachtepetl - as she now understood it to be - was quiet, just the spitting of torches in the gentle wind of night, the mute horror as the realisation gathered.

Todd got to his feet, staring at the boy Primo. 'You crazy fucking son of a bitch!'

'It has to happen. There is no other way.' He was bereft of life and purpose. He had done his work, the thing which defined his existence. Now he stood, incongruous in the clothes of another age even to Emiousha's eyes, without a care in the world. 'The God must be born.'

'Enough of this.' The words were spoken in a third language, one she now knew to be Nahuatl. There were rough hands at her shoulders, something cold and sharp jabbed into the small of her back. The face at her neck was hidden behind bands of pigment, red and black with a mask demarcated by white spots painted around the eyes. This was a face absolutely at one with its culture, an immovable object. It might have terrified the Kithriarch had she not known that worse was about to come, the worst scenario that could be imagined; and so she barely noticed as she

was pushed, slammed against wooden bars which were then closed and bound with thickly knotted vines. She could hear the drums resume and saw the stone knife once more raised to the black sky above its victim; and Gedarra was there by her side.

The Omniscian smiled. 'Welcome to the end of everything.'

12.4 (south)

Memories swam through Momacani's thoughts, chasing instincts known only to themselves, and occasional collisions were inevitable. He knew that he had been washed and anointed for the second time in a certain number of days, and had now been recently painted as was fitting to the occasion. He could not move, arms and legs pulled taught by four or more sets of clerical hands, although he had no reason to move and was not in pain, so it hardly seemed to matter.

Of course, they had given him knife water. He recalled that much. Just after the painting of his flesh with the hue and the symbols of Xiuhtecuhtli, he had taken knife water and that was to account for his present sense of well being.

Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin was at his side, arms raised, a stone blade gripped in his hands and held high. Oddly, the knife of the blade was in exact line of sight with the constellation of Miec - a starry smudge like a tiny explosion, or a vast explosion at immense distance. One might imagine this to be a scene wherein the Tlatoani had cut open the night sky to release another fifty-two years from the realms beyond. Momacani considered the image and decided it was quite reasonably close to the truth. The Tlatoani appeared to be unmoving, or at least to be moving so improbably slow as to seem still; but it might equally well be the case that knife water had stung Momacani's thoughts to a pace swifter than even that of the fastest birds.

'You stupid man. You will ruin us all.' He knew the words would not be heard, but it brought him pleasure to hear himself speak them, to look Xocoyotzin in the eye - an absolute taboo these days he seemed to recall - and to speak the truth that no other dared say without a care in the world. 'Superstitious fool who is scared of his own shadow.'

As a man who had quite recent good cause to fear his own shadow, Momacani felt himself able to frame this as an accusation with a degree of authority.

Unexpectedly his thoughts formed themselves in a neat line, little fishes

ready to begin the race, good fortune and nothing more. It was much like throwing stones at the ground and having them land in a familiar pattern.

Every fifty-two years, the Mexica would make a great sacrifice to the God of Fire and the Passage of Time, fire being born from the sun, the motivating force of the cycle of years. Thus fortified, Lord Xiuhtecuhtli would renew the calendar, postponing the death of the sun for the duration of another xiuhmolpilli. There had been some confusion, and some sort of confrontation involving the demon - Yaotl - evidently not quite so benign as he had come to believe - but the important point was that he had received the honour of being chosen, and here he was, soon to be blessed.

Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin was moving around, now at something close to the ordinary speed of life, and he was talking, or rather making some incantation, but his words were not clear. There was something in his hand.

A heart.

Specifically his own heart, pumping away like a busy old librarian resenting some interruption to its routine, held up towards the constellation as though about to register its complaint in the strongest possible terms. Momacani tipped his eyes a little way down and noted the cavity in his chest, broken ribs at awkward angles like the sort of derelict sea beast one might find on a beach. That knife water was nothing if not potent.

Hands scrabbled around him, no longer required to hold him down and now turned to the task of stuffing his chest with kindling, wood and straw, then a short, fat log thick as his wrist. He could feel it pressing down upon his spinal column, so they must have hollowed him out. Most likely his meat was in the eagle vessel he could see from the corner of his eye. Motecuhzoma set a wooden drill into him and began to work the bow, back and forth building the fire.

He felt a spark. There was a whiff of smoke.

Something roughly the size of the sky moved into his life, what little there had been of it, extending itself into all the gaps, the parts that hadn't made sense; and the aspect of this which really struck Momacani was that it moved with such confidence. It knew exactly what it was doing and had prepared for this moment long before.

The universe was made of words, it turned out, and so the people had taken to speaking words that defined their lives, the places in which they built their houses and so on; but these words were quiet, very small, utterances never to be heard by a human ear. This spirit presently moving through him had changed all of the rules, speaking with the loudest

clamour of creation, making things anew by the sound of its voice, and so creation found itself obliged to obey.

It was only a ritual, but this one had been spoken with the words that formed the heavens and the earth and the worlds below from out of the foam of the primal sea. His people, these children of Great Houses as they knew themselves; this was their work. He had built a mechanism from cause and effect, a pattern scored upon the surface of history itself, and by means of this operation he was here and due to be reborn as the God of Fire and the Passage of Time.

Momacani wished he had understood some of this earlier. His last days might have been a little less fraught.

The spirit - Fire in the Serpent as they had called him, this being roughly how his name sounded to a Nahuatl speaker - had borrowed the life of Acamapichtli, the first ruler and father of the city, placing him as a cuckoo that would provide meaning to his design. The eastern cuckoo was born in place of the true child of his mother, so the true child became the dead boy who went to live in the north. The false life of the dead boy provided a home for the lost house, a hiding place, and so they in their turn provided him with sustenance, although of course neither party was aware of this arrangement at the time. The western house gave up its last male child to the south and to Mexico - He Who Gives Of Himself as he had been named by the priest Ocotochtli with characteristic foresight - an orphan fated to become the vessel of Xiuhtecuhtli.

And that was me, Momacani's fading consciousness reminded itself.

He had once been told that at the moment of death, one's entire life was experienced in a flash of songs and memories, that just briefly a person on their way to the afterlife would recall in a single instant all that had brought them to that point. This seemed to be happening to him, although the memories conflicted for he had lived something resembling a life prior to this one, born from a machine called a breeding engine, fashioned by Goralschai.

At some point he had spoken the words of another language, and this now returned to him, far too late to be of use in this final moment. His name had been Rhodenet.

The issue of his parentage and childhood had arisen numerous times during his training in the Calmecac under the tutelage of Ocotochtli. The subject remained a mystery, although only now did he possess the faculties to appreciate this. At the time his thoughts had never truly been turned to

the subject, always scared away by some ghost or other, so that not only had he been unable to consider where he might have come from, he had been denied even the capability of dedicating himself to the subject; and by some means this effect had applied to those around him with equal integrity.

It was not even as though he had somehow popped into existence fully formed, freshly reborn according to the designs of his absentee father. He was simply a man with no discrete beginning.

It seemed in addition that he was now to be a man with no discrete ending.

His body was dead, a blazing torso with limbs desiccating at the extremities, eyes boiling dry in their sockets. This being the most noble death of all, he had begun to anticipate joining those who had died upon the battlefield in Tonatiuhcan, the House of the Sun; and yet he was still here, no longer quite able to tell which had been himself, which was Goralschai, which was to be the emergent Fire God.

The composure of the alien - another unfamiliar term coming to him quite naturally - was beyond his understanding, a desire for destruction; perhaps not even anything so strong as desire, more in the way of a drive or a compulsion, just forward motion.

He was filled with something which regarded even worlds and suns - their apparently being many in the higher heavens - as a defilement of the purity of the firmament. Life was a scrabbling, disgusting thing to him, a clamouring noise spoiling the harmony of the void. It wasn't even hatred, having gone far beyond anything formed from the repellent substance of cognition. Even with all of his newly and briefly expanded vocabulary, he could find nothing which came close, excepting perhaps nausea.

For a moment he tried to understand, imagined a logic in which this terrible impulse would make sense, but there was none. It seemed reasonable that the sole means by which one might understand Goralschai would be to become Goralschai, but this was effectively the process to which Momacani had sacrificed himself, and even he remained ignorant. It was an instinct beyond the province of even matter, never mind life.

Xiuhtecuhtli bloomed from the conflagration, expanding to the heavens.

In the beginning, the Gods had made humanity from the bones of the people of an earlier world. Xolotl had brought the bones up from the underworld, Quilaztli had ground them to flour, and they had spent the rest of the day sat around moulding little dough men. Of course, absolutely

anyone can make people out of flour or clay or whatever biomass you may have to hand. The difficult part is animating the bodies, instilling them with the breath of life. So the Gods sacrificed themselves, one by one each falling to the knife, so that some of that which animated them might go into the bodies of the people. Being Gods they didn't die, but became unfortunately immortal, and so a contract was necessary simply because there's no such thing as a free lunch.

Humanity gave what it could in blood and other offerings so that the Gods might be sustained, and the Gods in turn played their part, sending rain to water crops, drilling the fire of life into the newborn, that sort of thing. That was their work, but more than that, it was their substance. It was their nature.

Xiuhtecuhtli continued, expanding to the size of the Earth, then the Earth and all of the heavens and the worlds below. The rules had changed at a fundamental level, cosmic strings, m-branes, gluons, black holes, singularities, mu-mesons and all those good things reducing to ideas about the world as conceived in the mind of a man living on Earth in the year 1506; reducing to a land made from the body of the Earth Monster in a universe created exactly 2,461 years before, a land in which a God might sweep it all away with a gesture.

There would be nothing left behind, no matter from which a memorial would be crafted, just perfection occupying no space and no time.

How was it not possible to see the beauty of such an idea?

Goralschai cracked his notional knuckles and did what he'd wanted to do for a long, long time.

12.5

It is a new day, the first new day by some definition. Wind blows across the summit of Huixachtepetl scattering ashes and other material, but there is no-one to see. Grackles, finches and tiny doves with feathers so patterned as to resemble brickwork root and click amongst the acacias, free to peck at seeds or insects in the absence of people. The infrequent visit of a stray hummingbird provides a flash of colour, and then there is blood red amongst lower branches which turns out to be a flycatcher; and aside from the wind there is silence.

This moment is the world's nostalgia for the time before Quilaztli ground the bones to make people, no less real or valuable for there being

neither man nor woman here to see it, no human nor any person who might turn out to be more than human. This is a landscape presently untainted by the understanding of those who might stand here and look out across the valley towards the mountains, Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl, and down below the volcanic cinder cone of Xicco at the heart of Lake Chalco. This is the thing itself.

The period of night between today and its predecessor was busy with people, the Mexica from the city to the north. There was noise, light, song, and one man was sacrificed, and another - one who had lived for longer than the ages of all the rest put together - finally found death.

The existing memory of the event has it that he became a God to end the pain of experience, or that being as good as immortal, he had decided he wished to live no longer and contrived a road which led to his passing. Some might imagine certain thoughts running through his head, or attempt to understand that which drove him to do what he did, but they are wasting their time. We can hardly presume to understand the innermost experience of even our fellows, much less of creatures born when the universe was young. To die and find oneself still alive, over and over; to know that even going into the fires of the sun one would simply become the sort of creature suited to live quite happily in such a place, and that there could be no end: we could never understand what is seen by such a person, even were it desirable or necessary. Sometimes it is better that we leave things to be just themselves and assume that they know what they are doing, because quite often this will turn out to be true.

The people are gone from Huixachtepetl, having returned to their homes before dawn. The latter part of the night revealed no intimation of an end to the calendar, and the Lord of the House of Dawn, Tlahuixcalpantecuhtli - the morning star to the more literally minded of us - had risen high in the sky by the time the people had crossed the Itztapalapan causeway and so they had assumed that the eagle would not be too far behind, and would most likely soar upwards to the heavens at the usual time. Still some were not happy, crucially Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin, the ninth to sit upon the seat and mat of Tenochtitlan; but then such men tend to find worms in even the freshest fruit, and so for the moment it remains his problem.

There is movement in the bushes to one side of the ceremonial area - this being a temporary space demarcated by eagle vessels, braziers, and an altar. Further back, nearer the summit, the low platform for which these objects are headed remains for the present unfinished. This is lost on the opossum that emerges from the bush, pointed white snout rooting through

the debris. Her tail is bare, her coat is bushy, and she would not ordinarily be out in the day but for the all night party obliging her to make adjustments to her schedule. She ambles across the temporary square, and her eyes - eyes which many have remarked bear an unsettling resemblance to the human - rest upon a block of rectangular sheets of paper, glued together down one edge, printed in the letters of an alphabet that will remain unknown for another thirteen years.

13.1 (east)

'So allow me to get this straight.' Doña Ultima knotted her face into disbelief. 'This brujo was from another *planet*? This is what you are telling your seventy-two year old grandmother?'

Primo regarded the little stone idol of Chantico she had elected to keep by the door looking out onto the yard. She'd cleaned it up and done a fine job. It was volcanic basalt, pockmarked, and hardly the work of a master craftsmen, but what few scraps of pigment still clung to the rough surface were bright. This Hearth Goddess looked as good as she ever would.

'Planet is as good a word as any, I suppose.' He tried to remember Gedarra's description of her Homeworld, but it hadn't made much sense at the time. 'It's really no more strange than you and I sat here having this conversation when you think about it.'

Ultima conceded a frown of concurrence and took another swig from her beer. 'One would like to have thought that men from Mars had more about them.'

'It wasn't Mars.' He half wished he hadn't mentioned the extraterrestrial aspect of the story.

'You know what I mean.' She broke wind without so much as a flicker to acknowledge the act. 'I suppose it is comforting to know that they also have idiots up there.' She raised her eyes to the ceiling as though Goralschai had originated in her roof space.

'He was no fool, just insane and very powerful. He hated the world.'

Ultima stood and ambled over to the sink where she began to wash the plates from which they had eaten lunch, which struck Primo as a peculiar act given their location.

'This is very difficult for me to admit, as I'm sure you appreciate.' She spoke now with her back turned. 'But I am very proud of you, Primo. You have done a fine and noble thing.'

'I did little, although I thank you for such kind words.' His gaze idled around the kitchen, checking for discrepancies between this place and what he could recall of the one in the world above. 'The brujo perished by his own hand. He went against nature, and we cannot go against nature; not one of us.'

Ultima nodded sagely and stacked a plate upon the drying rack. 'Like I said, an idiot.'

Primo rolled the equation around in his head one more time, savouring the satisfaction of knowing that he had been right to trust his intuition. Goralschai had engendered the conditions in which he could manifest as a God; he had become the living embodiment of Xiuhtecuhtli the God of Fire and the Passage of Time, the one responsible for the cyclical renewal of the universe; *but* he had failed to grasp that the essence of the Fire God was sacrifice, and that the essence of sacrifice was generative. It had no other purpose. Xiuhtecuhtli was not an expression of free will, he was the process itself. The brujo had found the largest gun in the universe little realising that it could only ever be held to his own head. God or not, Ultima was correct in thinking him an idiot.

It was, however, a common pattern. Primo had seen it in the faces of anglos, presuming on either his amiable lack of intelligence or unbridled lust for the contents of their wallets. He had read it in his books, the assumption that a culture without wheels - regardless of all the reasons why wheels would have been all but useless in fifteenth century Mexico - should be considered backwards even by the most generous terms. Gedarra's people had technology beyond anything he would understand, so his own culture was therefore necessarily mere source material, something exotic that could be purchased with a handful of coloured beads, something to be put to use by those with a much better idea of the possibilities.

'You realise I can hear at least some of your thoughts.' Ultima chuckled and took another swig from the bottle as she eased herself down into the chair. 'No need to look so scared. I am simply glad to know that there is so little I can teach you.'

Feeling self-conscious, Primo stood and went to look out over the yard. If he didn't know better, he really would have sworn he was back in Cholula de Rivadavia. Even the sun warmed his face with the same caress.

Perhaps sensing his discomfort, the old woman changed the subject. 'I have looked in your books as you asked, and it is true. Motecuhzoma conducted a New Fire Ceremony in 1507, but not in the previous year. The man who wrote the book says it was all down to politics.'

'Then it was as I suspected.' Primo caught himself saying this but realised he did not truly know what to believe, whether all he saw had simply been struck from the records, or whether in some sense it had never happened. This second option, despite common sense, seemed somehow

likely given at least some of the forces involved. Perhaps it no longer mattered. 'Have you spoken with my mother?'

He thought of his books gathering dust in his room, all lined up on the shelf never to be opened again, which had brought him back to the thing he had been avoiding. Of course she would have spoken to her own daughter. The question was ridiculous but he could think of no other way to broach the subject.

'She is well but she is upset as you would expect.' Doña Ultima looked to the ground, the tiled floor shining from her memory of having mopped it in the real world only that morning. For a second she appeared to age by about a decade. She could say no more.

A lump rolled up in Primo's throat and his eyes bulged to block the tears. 'All the earth is a grave and nothing escapes it; nothing is so perfect that it does not descend to its tomb.'

'I know.' Her voice was old and sad, a strange and unfortunate reversal of roles: herself the guileless student just for an instant.

'I will see her down here just as I see you now.'

'María has been in the city too long. She will not remember. I do not want you to get your hopes up, my child.' Her leathery hand slid across the table to take his as he sat back down. Cool, old fingers squeezed after a moment of consideration. 'I will speak with her on that telephone. I shall see what we can do.'

The mood lightened. This was not a farewell.

A square of sunlight had been crawling across the dust and sand for more than an hour and had now reached the reed mat upon which Primo lay asleep. He opened his eyes, recalling only the fact of a conversation with his grandmother before the noise of Tenochtitlan chased the words from his memory. The city was awake, and most would have been awake since dawn, but he was a foreigner by some definition and allowances had been made.

This was the fifth day. The sun had risen five times since the aborted ceremony on Huixachtepetl. He recalled for a moment that his grandmother had told him something relating to the event, but he didn't want to think about it just yet. He pushed off his blanket and stood, naked, wrapping himself in his maxtlatl, a length of cloth worn about the waist and legs like pants. It wasn't so difficult once you had the hang of it, although the first day in his new wardrobe had been peppered with comments made out of

earshot which had most likely referred to his poor efforts at dressing himself.

This done, he pulled on his tilmatli, knotting it at the shoulder so that it covered his body like a cloak, then tied his sandals.

Outside the sun was bright - probably about nine in the morning for what little that was now worth - and the air sharp, not yet warmed after the chill of dusk. He was stood within a courtyard, the same to which he and Gedarra had been brought when they first arrived. He wondered now at the fate of the alien woman. He had found her inscrutable and difficult to consider with any great sense of affection, but that probably wasn't her fault, and he hoped she was okay. He hoped they were all okay. Whatever had happened back there had apparently been for the best, but no-one seemed clear about what that might have been.

'You are risen.' This statement of the obvious hailed from Icnopilli, approaching from the direction of the ceremonial square, his call rising above the noise and chatter of Mexica off to the fields or market or other parts of the confederacy. 'You know that this is your fifth day.'

He knew, and understood the Ixtilli's inference. Five was the number that completed the circuit, that made a whole as it did with the five points of the Quincunx amongst other things. He had been here four days and would now be required to submit his decision.

'I appreciate your hospitality.' The Ixtilque had brought Primo here, and they had done so without the knowledge of Motecuhzoma who would almost certainly have treated him as the Mexica tended to treat anyone touched by the sacred. It seemed this office which history would fail to recall had been formed under the aegis of Ahuizotl, the previous ruler to whom at least a few of their number still felt greater loyalty.

'Then you are to deliver a refusal?' Unsmiling, Icnopilli's brow nevertheless creased in a suggestion of good humour. 'You are throwing icy water upon us?'

Primo examined his sandals. He realised, apropos of nothing, that he may as well start getting some mileage out of his second name.*Primo* no longer made sense, and sounded like gibberish to those who spoke only Nahuatl or Otomí.

Icnopilli chuckled. 'Or is it that I myself throw icy water upon you!'

This was either Mexica humour or just Icnopilli. Acamapichtli returned the smile to show that he was amused, or had at least understood that the

remark was supposed to be funny.

'Let us fill our stomachs, and then I will hear your decision if you have arrived at one.' The Mexica turned and called towards the entrance of the chamber, the passage leading to the rest of the Ixtilcalli building. Food would soon arrive. 'Now how are you within yourself?'

'I am well. It has not returned if that is what you mean.' Acamapichtli's ixihtec had ceased to bring anything back from the dead since the morning of his first day here in Tenochtitlan. This seemed like it was probably a good thing.

Icnopilli sat upon a mat laid out along one wall, gathering ceramic cups from a coffer in readiness for their meal. He knew about Acamapichtli's ixihtec, about his being twinned from the ruler who shared his name and some of the ritual which had made use of this. He even understood that Acamapichtli knew some details of the future, of what would happen over the next few decades. This was the sort of thing that the Ixtilque had been charged to investigate and catalogue, and also the sort of thing that would earn favour with the enormously superstitious Motecuhzoma should this anachronistic guest be discovered.

'What is it that you want, Acamapichtli?'

He wanted to be back in Mexico City, to do almost anything but put his mother through the grief of having lost a son. Beyond that desire, or that which might lead to its fulfilment, he did not know. It seemed unlikely that he would be able to cross centuries simply by disappearing into a cave this time. Neither did he really wish to remain here, not considering who was now upon the seat and mat of the city; and he had no desire to witness this culture brought to its knees in just fifteen years time.

Acamapichtli stared into his cup of aniseed flavoured juice and considered his past and his future as one and the same.

13.2 (north)

He fitted the heel of the spear into the notch at the end of his atlatl, raised his arm ready to go. The rabbit hadn't moved. That was just great, but in the second he'd taken to charge his weapon, he'd lost sight of it in the long grass of the plain. This sort of deal would have been a whole lot easier with a rifle or gun of some kind, but he'd never seen the need to use one when he was alive - or at least when he was *up there* - and in any case, firearms didn't work too good here in Tlalocan. It was the territory, he'd decided

after the first couple of months, a world he understood to be sustained by the beliefs of his grandmother's people - of whom there had been plenty over the centuries - and so a world in which the kind of stuff they believed in tended to work better than anything with which they weren't so familiar. Traditional tools were easy to obtain and master, surprisingly so in fact. Foot spas, trouser presses, and jet skis were thin on the ground and tended to be unreliable even when you could find them.

That was all assuming this really *was* Tlalocan, the afterlife of his ancestors. Thraenrellis had told him about a city at the end of the universe, a place where everyone who ever lived got to live again. It sounded unlikely, plus it raised the question of how come *she* was here along with her folks given that this magic city had a humans only door policy, so she said.

This probably isn't the City, she told him, *or it is and we're all human now. How the hell should I know?*

He chuckled to think of all those Meddhoran refugees cussing away to themselves, picking up all his modes of speech, getting bad habits.

There was a movement. Todd directed all of his strength into his upper arm and hurled the spear. It sliced the air, about ninety miles per hour it was generally believed. There wasn't even a sound, just a dead rabbit at fifty yards, killed instantly.

He'd known a few hunters back then, but not really through choice. It was always those folks from Alamo Heights and around there. Heading out in their trucks and killing shit because that was what you did once you were in a certain tax bracket. Johnson had a framed photograph of himself and a few buddies in the office, all grinning stood around a carpet of dead ducks. They had shot something like a hundred. Todd asked why but he couldn't remember what the answer had been, something dumb and fucking annoying. Anyway, the point was that now, and right here on this end of the atlatl, it felt righteous and made a whole lot of sense. He was feeding his adopted people with the sweat of his brow and all that whole dog and pony show and that was good, and definitely better than about a thousand other things he'd wasted time with during his previous nonlife.

'Go on, boy. Do your stuff.' He chuckled, watching Scarface sniffing around the base of a mesquite tree.

The Chihuahua considered him for a moment, then raised its leg in illustration of some point. 'I'm busy.'

'You're a dog. Go do some of that dog stuff like you know you want to.'

'That rabbit's bigger than I am. The deal goes so far as sniffing out but no fetching other than for recreational purposes.' He began digging a hole, scrabbling at the dry earth with his front paws. 'If there's a problem, have your people talk to my people and we'll renegotiate the contract.'

'You fool.' Todd laughed, wondering if Face had possessed this same sense of humour first time around, back before he'd been able to talk.

He dropped the atlatl by his net and walked over to get the rabbit.

The sun of the underworld was low upon the notional horizon, an idyllic glow of gold spreading out like a skirt. Todd squinted, looking across the land towards Huehueicnocaltlan.

He still didn't get all the details of how this worked. He wondered if any of them did. He understood that the frozen mist swept plains of Mictlan were the lot of only those who had passed in some low situation, a group amongst which he would not have numbered even had he been properly alive in the first place. This was therefore most likely Apan at the eastern edge of Tlalocan. Those Mexicans had put a lot of thought into all the different kinds of afterlife to which one might be posted.

However, unlike his adopted family, Todd had never been truly born - nor *loomed* even, he reminded himself. He was an historical sequence suppressed by the Quincunx even *before* it was ever begun, specifically suppressed by the birth of Primo; and only the fact of Goralschai hiding House Meddhoran within his potential lifeline had kept him artificially pinned to that great big reality corkboard. This made sense of a lot of things that had never quite made sense before - having neither past nor future, his life had been a self-contained bubble of present, which was why people tended to forget him if they hadn't spoken in a couple of weeks.

It still didn't really explain how he was *here*, but he guessed his fate had become entangled with that of the childrene, and that had drawn him here; or maybe it really didn't matter. Now that he actually had something resembling a life by some description, he'd come to recognise the *what it was* as more important than the *why it should be*.

He plucked the rabbit from its bloody patch of grass, pulling the spear tip from its head, then crossed back and added it to the rest of the game in his net: mostly fish he'd wrapped in some sacking Dorhira had given him so as to keep it fresh, or at least keep off the worst bugs.

'We should be getting back, I guess.'

'Okay.' Scarface filled in the hole he'd been digging with his back legs,

tail wagging. 'How about Thraenrellis?'

'She was over in the woods last I saw, or she was heading that way this morning.'

'This morning...' There was an unspoken question.

'You know what I mean.' He wiped the spear tip on a cloth kept in his pouch for the purpose, bundled up his things, and slung the net over one shoulder.

The two of them headed west, oriented to a low lying group of trees about a mile away. As they drew closer, they could see a low adobe building with a flat roof in the shade of the spinney. The front was open, a metal shutter blind rolled up into the roof space, cheerful beer logos painted on the wall at the side, hand lettered with the sort of wild enthusiasm you never saw north of the Mexican border. Out front was a circular table, wrought iron with a couple of matching chairs, just one guy sat there in the sun.

He raised his head, gazing out from under the brim of his hat. He smiled and lifted a glass. 'Hunting again, I see.'

Todd nodded in acknowledgement of the patently obvious. 'Drinking again, I see.'

The man removed his hat. He had short blonde hair and glasses, and wore a smart suit even here in the heat at the end of the afternoon. He seemed like someone who had one day woken up and discovered himself to be a systems analyst, and would never quite recover from either the surprise or disappointment. Even smiling in welcome he had a face that spoke of a quiet sadness, the sorrow that came with those who died before their time.

Face jumped up into his lap, barking happily.

'I suppose you want a drink *too*.' The man laughed.
'No thanks. I'm a dog.'

The barkeep, an older man with the typical Zapata moustache emerged from the cantina with a glass of mezcal and a bowl of water, the usual.

'We have you well trained.' Todd laughed and sat.

The barkeep effected comic offence and set the bowl down for the dog. He regarded Todd's net, boggle eyed as any disgruntled rustic from a telenovela. 'I was hoping for venison. I suppose I do not have *you* trained quite well enough!'

They chuckled amongst themselves and the man vanished back to his bar.

Todd raised his glass, clinking it against the other's beer. 'How you doing, Andrew?'

'I'm very well, thank you, all things considered.'

One of these things considered would be his having died back in 2009 and found himself here. He'd never quite worked out why - being neither Mexican nor familiar with its mythical underworld - but had nevertheless appreciated the second chance.

The two of them sat in silence for a moment. Todd swilled his glass and sniffed, savouring the aroma of the alcohol. He couldn't remember having drunk this particular spirit back in the day. He'd had the occasional shot of tequila of course, but it was never a favourite. This was similar, except more drinkable.

'So where have you been?'

Andrew gulped, a strange affectation which somehow made perfect sense of his being from some place in England, assuming that such terms still applied beyond the grave. 'San Antonio funnily enough. Did you know they have a San Antonio down in Apan, under the waves?'

'I didn't, but I guessed they most likely would.'

Scarface glanced up from his water. 'All times and places are to be found down here.'

'We know.' Todd pulled a face.

'I take it you haven't thought to visit?' Andrew took another pull from his bottle.

Todd shook his head and wondered why not. For some reason it hadn't occurred to him that he might seek out places he'd known from before. 'You liked it?'

'It was okay.' Andrew gulped again, nodding hastily. 'There are places I like better, others I like less, I suppose you would say.'

This was as definitive an answer as Todd had yet heard from the softly spoken Englishman, and he knew him well enough to be amused by his diplomacy.

The two of them had met about a month before, finding common ground in shared appreciation of a quiet drink without the pressure of having to be entertaining. He'd never really understood what Andrew did when he was

alive, but it wasn't anything that had made him happy. It seemed a waste somehow, but then again maybe not - the guy seemed to appreciate this afterlife, spending his days just wandering, seeing the post-mortem equivalents of places he'd never found time to visit when he was alive.

'Where were you born, man? I know you told me once.'

'You wouldn't know it.'

'You ever go back there?'

'No point.' For just a moment, Andrew seemed supremely contented.

13.3 (west)

The flattened head of Emiousha's adze bit into the earth, revealing the darker stratum of moisture beneath the dry, black clay. She pulled back on the cedarwood handle and the clod obligingly broke into pieces. She smiled, hefting up the tool to examine the metal.

Dorhira's creative streak had bloomed in recent weeks. She wondered if that was something to do with what had happened, what she had lost. Perhaps the Biblarian had taken to this other means of expression as a result, birthing their first metal tools from the rocks she pulled out of the ground, roasting off the sulfides, battering the alloy into shape.

The childrene had, with this first penetrative act of Dorhira's adze, entered the bronze age. Perhaps it might no longer be appropriate to refer to themselves as childrene. They were grown. Five of their number now had young of their own.

Again she raised the adze above her head, bringing it down into the soil. She repeated the act, stepping back each time, moving towards the rear of the compound, then edging along to do it all over again with the next row. At length, the square plot was extended to twice its original size. Her maize, now concentrated at one end of its newly expanded terrain was doing well, although they were still some way from the harvest. She had planted beans and squashes between the stalks in accordance with Dorhira's suggestion. The beans climbed the stems of the maize plant and served to fertilise the soil. The squashes provided ground cover, retaining moisture and preventing the spread of weeds. This was apparently how the people of this principality had done it for thousands of years.

This principality - she still had not quite acclimatised to what it meant.

Gedarra saw it as a conceptual realm, essentially no different to the

Eleven-Day Empire but for its being maintained by the faith of those in the world above - *above* being a somewhat subjective term in this instance - who still believed in this form of afterlife. Emiousha had learnt the word *bullshit* from Todd Calavero and first tried it out as an evaluation of Gedarra's theory.

House Meddhoran, failing to materialise within the Nemontemi of the local calendar might have, once free of the Netherweald, latched onto the nearest conceptual equivalent, that nearest conceptual equivalent being Cihuatlan on the western edge of the Mexica underworld. It was a neat explanation, somewhat let down by the fact of House Meddhoran ceasing to exist prior to their arrival; and, with Nemontemi turning out to be an empty promise, it seemed implausible that the Ordnance-Tetrarch would have troubled to encode it within the transmigration protocols he stole from the Faction.

Perhaps they had simply been drawn here by sheer weight of meaning, the raw symbolic force of their role in the Quincunx; perhaps the residual presence of high-level War era technology had wrought for them an existence from the mythological constructs of the people living above; or perhaps, quite simply, they had died and now lived on in the afterlife of a culture that had turned out to know more about the mechanism of the universe than any of them would have suspected.

Perhaps none of this mattered so much as the simple fact of their having survived.

The sun was now long past zenith, drawing to the end of its daily journey across an azure sky, oblivious to this making no sense in such an obviously subterranean realm beneath a heaven of stone, soil, and roots. Emiousha squinted in the burning light and envisioned something that might be worn upon her head to afford protection at this time of notional day, a flat cone formed from one of the thicker sheets of bark paper that Rothis had pulled from her tank.

Done with tilling the soil, she turned and headed back to the village, to Huehueicnocaltlan, *Place of the Orphan Great House* as it had elected to name itself with unsettling acuity. She crossed the plain, and then those great rocks somehow affording a panoramic view of their realm in contradiction to the common sense of what should or should not be visible within a vast cavern beneath a primitive theological model of the world. In the distance she could see Apan, the Great Ocean. Once they were fully settled, once they were in a position to explore further, they would go there. Acamapichtli, on one of his infrequent visits, had told them that all of the

world lay beneath its waters. Emiousha, even before she had adopted the habit of regularly pointing out when things didn't make sense, pointed out that this didn't make sense. Acamapichtli laughed and told her about Mexico City. He said it could be found there, in Apan, in some form, and that she should visit it one day. It was, he claimed, a wonderful place in many respects.

She crossed the ridge of a small hill and Huehueicnocaltlan came into view. The village comprised a central square with twelve buildings, four established along each of three sides. These were two room dwellings, basic walls with a flat roof, all made of wood, posts woven with wicker and straw. Thraenrellis and Laethynrisa were presently working their way around, fortifying each house with a plaster of sand, clay, and crumbled limestone. Like the adze, the forging of metal and other practices they had adopted, these things had not been learned, at least not formally. They seemed to be inherent to the landscape down here. For all that which they had been taught through the anamnesis of their looming, it seemed that the land knew best.

The Kithriarch went down the hill, treading carefully so as to maintain her footing upon the scorching sand and stones. Ahead she could see her sisters at work, enjoying the shade of the great cypress at the heart of the square. Rothis and Laethynrisa ground maize flour. Gedarra carried squalling neonates to the nursery, one of six buildings that no-one had yet claimed for their dwelling. Dorhira could be doing almost anything, maintaining records, making paper, weaving from the cotton she had been cultivating; whatever task kept her occupied, neither she nor Thraenrellis were in the square.

How did we become so damn biological, Emiousha wondered, unaware of yet another affectation picked up from Todd Calavero. There were black circlets of clay ingrained so deep beneath her fingernails as to defy all attempts at cleaning. Her flesh was laced with scratches and cuts from thorns and cacti, despite which it glowed as never before. Her limb ached, although this was not in itself an unpleasant sensation. *These cuts and bruises are the signs of life*, she decided. *Dirt means only that something is happening, moving forward.* She had no idea how the term *sisters* had found its way into her vocabulary, but there it was, proof of her own crude, meaty, biology; a word for the sort of people who eat and have babies and change over time.

They had come a long way since they left the Homeworld. They had travelled further than any of their number could have anticipated.

Gedarra nodded, an informal salute - it had been a while since anyone had prefixed a greeting with *well met*. She stood in the shade with Esseintes in her arms, Emiousha's son.

Emiousha let her adze fall to the thin, rough grass, and took the neonate with a smile. She cooed, pulled faces to draw a giggle of pleasure from the tiny creature, then, bouncing him in her arm, turned to the others. 'Where is Thraenrellis?'

'She is here.' The call came from between the two houses at the corner.

'She is there.' Gedarra made an elaborate display of pointing and then disappeared into the nursery to tend her charges.

Thraenrellis came into view with another, the human Todd Calavero.

Maybe they were *all* human now and the distinction had ceased to matter. Emiousha filed the idea away for later consideration, perhaps for the fields when she found herself in need of something by which to occupy her thoughts.

'We got us some rabbit and fish.' The human half-turned so they could see the game-stocked net that he had carried upon his back. 'You got something ready for this?'

Rothis and Laethynrisa had both ceased their activities and went to examine the spoils of the hunt. Thraenrellis laid her spear and atlatl against the tree and went into the last building of the square, the one they had made for a smoke house.

Emiousha continued to bounce Esseintes with her one arm. 'You have served us very well. We are grateful for what you bring.'

Todd Calavero chuckled, ignoring the playful sarcasm. 'Thraenrellis did most the work. Myself I never had much call to go chasing after eating rabbits back in San Antonio. I just provided the dog is all.'

Rothis went into the building next to the smoke house and emerged with a nest of clay pots, Dorhira's work naturally. She set the largest of these upon the three hearth stones arranged before the tree and began to work upon a fire.

'Talking of the dog...' Todd Calavero looked around. 'Where in hell did he get to?'

He shrugged and began to empty his hunting net, first a rabbit which he tossed over to Rothis. Laethynrisa meanwhile began preparing squashes and beans with a copper bladed knife.

The dog, Scarface, trotted into the clearing, tail whipping back and forth.

'What you got to be so happy about?' Todd Calavero hefted the net back up onto his shoulder.

'I'm a dog.' The chihuahua regarded him with huge dark eyes, its tiny body gently oscillating with the force of the wag. 'Excitement is my natural state.'

Emiousha had by this time wandered over to the nursery. She stood at the door, a simple rectangular opening in the front normally covered by a hanging length of fabric, and watched Gedarra settling the children to their respective berths, five of them, wooden frames and yet more fabric woven and stuffed with straw by the endlessly productive Dorhira.

The other woman sensed her presence and came over to take Esseintes.

The children were six months old, all born during the same night, a night that none of them would forget for a long time. Excepting Dorhira, the five of them had found themselves intuitively maternal, with what knowledge they lacked supplemented by whatever Todd Calavero could suggest or even the advice of other travellers encountered down here in Tlalocan. As with everything else, it seemed this supposedly inherent affinity must have come with the territory.

Esseintes was laid upon the fifth berth, and the children gurgled as Gedarra went from one to the other, comforting with a gentle touch or offering a clay feeding vessel full of expressed milk.

Emiousha absently felt the stump of the arm she had sacrificed. 'Do you ever consider how strange it is that we should find ourselves here, that we could have ever come this far?'

'I think of little else.' The Omniscian wiped a smudge of dirt from the forehead of Roquentin, the child of Thraenrellis, one of two males that had been born. 'Sometimes it seems that we have become more real, more physical, and less of a fiction; as though House Meddhoran was merely the idea by which we were brought to a truer way of life. Does that make sense?'

Emiousha nodded and admitted that, against all odds, it did make sense.

She turned back to watch the others skinning the rabbit, throwing scraps to the dog and sharing jokes.

It was a beautiful sight.

13.4 (south)

We live on this Earth only once it had been said to Momacani on a number of supposedly instructive occasions in preface to the usual homilies. Whilst this was most likely true for the majority, he was himself now on his third lap. He retained no actual memory of the first life, at least not beyond recalling that startled realisation of having once been some other personage; and he had no idea how he could somehow have survived the death of the second, beyond a vague feeling that whilst his grisly demise had been real to someone if not necessarily himself, by some obscure means it had, as of recently, no longer happened. It made no sense, but that was as best a summary as he could have given had anyone thought to ask; and in any case, it was simply a part of life, the truism that things did not always make sense, three and two not always adding up to five. It was the way of things.

The heat of morning had woken him, which was unusual given that he generally rose with dawn or sometimes a little before, it being his habit to spend a few moments watching Tlahuixcalpantecuhtli ascend the eastern heavens prior to the arrival of the sun. This morning was different and he was not sure quite why this should be.

He looked around his room, familiarising himself with the territory before making a move upon this fleeting unease. His reed mat was in its usual place against the eastern and interior wall. Next to the mat was a wooden coffer bequeathed to him by Ocotochtli, the repository of his materials, bark paper, feather quills, and a few pots of pigment secured with wooden stoppers. He was not much of a scribe and would never have presumed to call himself one, but such tools proved useful from time to time, particularly when he needed to work out some obscure point of the calendar that would not have warranted a special trip to the Calmecac for consultation with one of those priests versed in the count of years.

At the side of the coffer sat a small grouping of clay vessels, and with thoughts turned to the passage of time, his eyes lingered upon these as he accepted the sight of something other than that which he expected to see. Each vessel held some small totem pertaining to the ceaseless parade of Gods and Goddesses marching through the procession of days, along with totems of those days and numerical quantifiers. He tried to recall how he had missed a day or maybe more, but then realised this combination of objects marked the time to come rather than that which had passed. He wound forward from the New Fire Ceremony and saw that four days had passed, it now being Ce Calli or *One House*, the first of an entirely new

trecena, presiding deities being Itzpapalotl, Tlazolteotl and Tepeyollotl, an unambiguously auspicious day not least for being free of whatever had stamped itself upon the character of the previous group of thirteen.

He had no memory of what had occurred, of what had brought him to this moment.

He resumed the assessment of his chamber, where he kept his robes and sandals, the vessels by which he prepared food. In making this assessment he realised he had no partner, and nor could he recall having one, nor *even* being subject to the desire of one. This struck him as strange, and now he recalled some moment of the indeterminate but recent times where he had found himself similarly bewildered by the matter of his own parentage. He presumed himself to have mother and father, to have been formed in some more conventional crucible than the mixing bowl of the Goddess Quilaztli.

He had a memory, a good memory, so he had believed at some time. It was not so much that there were the gaps as experienced by those who fell or made rabbits of themselves with too great a frequency; it seemed more that there was material that had either never been there or had else become subject to change since its occurrence.

The thought calmed him somewhat, for it at least bore some resemblance to known functions of the calendar. History as recorded had certainly changed for the Mexica on a few occasions, not least during the reign of Lord Itzcoatl, and then there was the matter of previous ages of the world, there once being but four, a number recently expanded to five for myriad reasons. There was also the New Fire Ceremony, rescheduled by Xocoyotzin for Ome Acatl, a full year hence from the established date of renewal.

Momacani paused, stepping upon that thought as though crossing a stream and finding himself doubtful of the next stone that was to support his foot.

This coming ceremony would be held on Huixachtepetl and they had already begun the building work, and he recalled visiting the site but not why. He had spoken to Atlazol. It had not been a good time.

This had become infuriating. He was examining the details of his own life as though of some stranger, and this room the former habitat of some unfortunate soul who had been spirited away by sacred forces.

Two options presented themselves: he might rally against this unimaginable injustice, beat his head against the wall of his memory, and

risk becoming an aoompa, one who walks along the road allowing his eyes to look all around; alternately he might instead work with what little he apparently had, keeping in mind that not all stories could be fitted together as though one were building a patio. Life itself was a disorganised space full of paths leading nowhere, and it had so turned out that this was particularly true of his own life.

Sandals scuffed stone and the curtain was pushed aside as Icnopilli entered, his face as ever grey and inscrutable as he bowed low to mime taking a handful of dirt from the earth and throwing it back across himself. 'You are well?'

Momacani echoed the greeting with a reciprocal bow. He felt a little awkward, knowing that this was an unseemly time for an Ixtilli to be still so close to his mat. Whilst he expected to find some justification for such a sluggish start were he to dissect the mystery at hand, it was difficult to know how best to express this, even to another Ixtilli.

A moment passed as the two regarded each other.

'I propose we take our leave of Tenochtitlan and climb the hill of Huixachtepetl. If nothing else, our office burdens us with no pressing obligation and it is a pleasant day.' It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Icnopilli's suggestion seemed to carry a kinder tone than was customary, but certainly there was a softer edge, one which Momacani resisted interpreting as an element of confusion comparable with his own.

The two of them fortified themselves with meat and chilli wrapped in flat bread, then set out towards the south of the city, taking the Itztapalapan causeway down towards Culhuacan, arriving at the lower slope of Huixachtepetl just before midday. The conversation they had enjoyed on the journey, at least allowing for the reticence of Icnopilli, fixated mostly upon the Tonalpohualli and the count of days, specifically their interpretations of this day of Ce Calli.

As they began to ascend the path towards the summit, Icnopilli began to expand upon the theme, taking a more contemplative and personal tone. 'I must ask you - you yourself have opined that fate which can be predicted is not fate but something else entirely. I would say that you have now changed your mind.'

'I am no longer sure of quite what I should believe, but I have of late had cause to revise my view of history. I wish I were able to say more, but I myself do not fully understand.'

Icnopilli chuckled, a rare occurrence. 'I am told that when one sets to

walking, the rhythm of the journey may greatly nourish whichever organ forms the thoughts.'

The other smiled at the diplomacy, recalling from somewhere an argument about whether it was the liver or the head by which one maintained awareness. 'I think that I intend to do a great deal of walking.'

'Where will you go.'

Momacani considered the question. The subject held no more familiarity than any other mystery presented to him by the advent of dawn, but he recalled from somewhere that he had views in respect to this matter. 'I think I will go north, and perhaps I will find Aztlan.'

'That is as good a subject of pilgrimage as any.' The Ixtilli seemed pleased. 'I envy you. I would seek to join you were I not so old.'

Momacani had heard stories of Icnopilli's work in the office of the Ixtilque, hushed stories that could be neither confirmed nor denied as one would expect, but still he would like to have learned more. Icnopilli had supposedly witnessed the mythic town of Ayahueltlan, even visited a number of the heavens according to the wilder stories. Whether any of this was true or not, it was clear that he had some experience of events at the periphery of the noumena where life intersects the sacred realms. It could have been interesting to compare notes.

'You will maintain silence?' They had already taken the conversation into politically awkward territory, so the question did not seem unreasonable.

'No-one will know of your departure until you are very far away.'

Momacani considered the years ahead.

Tenochtitlan had but thirteen before it would fall just as Tollan had fallen many years before. Moon people with unpleasant habits and a disdain for cleanliness would arrive from some distant island in boats, rousing Tlaxcala and Huexotzinco and other states to make war against the Threefold Alliance. The land would be stricken with disease and everything would change. All that was good would be lost or defiled, and the people would lose sight of their contract with heaven, abandoning the habit of sacrifice, and adhering to a new creed by which it was thought - most likely quite wrongly - that nature would give of herself indefinitely without requiring anything in return. The worst of it was that Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin would roll over like a dog and allow the foreigners to tickle his tummy, and naturally they would betray him. Perhaps, with no New Fire

Ceremony observed this year, the calendar had already ended.

He examined these thoughts. Whatever their province, they felt true.

Icnopilli grunted to himself. 'I heard a story about a priest named Cohualxiu who made to trick the God Xiuhtecuhtli into giving him all of his power.'

Momacani looked at the elder man. 'I too know that tale from somewhere.'

'He became the God, failing to realise that all of his power was nothing without sacrifice, and so found himself obliged to give of himself. He imagined he might have power by which to go against nature, but found it impossible.'

'Why do you tell me this?'

The older Ixtilli hesitated, then shrugged. 'I'm not sure. It seemed somehow appropriate.'

They had by now reached the summit, and found themselves silenced by the fact of certain ceremonial fittings betraying recent usage, and traces of burnt offerings scattered around the building site. Momacani's foot met with something cool and smooth like a stone. He looked and saw a block of what looked like paper in the dirt, scratchy abstract symbols on the front arranged in a row. By some means he knew what it said.

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pur·ple (pûrpl) n.

1. Any of a group of colours with a hue between that of violet and red.

2. Cloth of a colour between violet and red, formerly worn as a symbol of royalty or high office.

3. Imperial power; high rank: e.g born to the purple.

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